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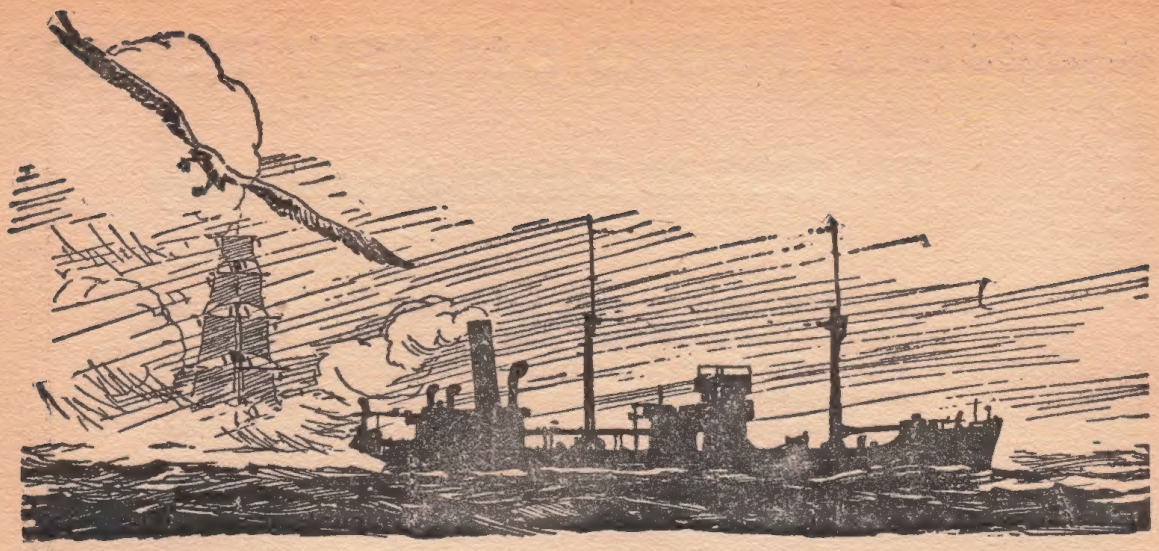

Talking of Tide Rips!

IN June of 1896 I left Vancouver with a mate, to try my hand at salmon fishing at Rivers Inlet on Queen Charlotte Sound, British Columbia. The cannery was several miles up the Inlet and about 350 miles north of Vancouver.

We sailed from Vancouver on the *Barbara Boscovitz,* a solid built old tub, originally a sailing craft, but fitted with steam for motive power. Having left a homestead on the Northwest Canadian prairie, in what was then the Province of Assiniboia and now styled Saskatchewan, with a background of turning prairie sod with oxen and a foot-burner plough, the trip from Vancouver was more than a novelty to me. The old *Boscovitz* smelled like a garbage wagon, on account of the accumulated odours of possibly one hundred years as a whaler in Bering Sea under Russian ownership.

We tied up to the cannery wharf on the Inlet about 2 p.m. of a Sunday morning. I pre-empted a bunk on a scow, fitted up for sleeping quarters, to be awakened about 10 a.m. by—of all things—a brass band playing hymns in the cannery building. So up I went to look-see, and found a corps of Siwashes, in Salvation Army rig, singing hymns, praying, and giving their religious experiences, all in the Chinook jargon. Chinook is a language, or jargon, compiled by a Catholic priest, which was used by whites and natives from the Gulf of California to the Arctic.

Just before the fish run started a strike was called. No agreement was arrived at, and in company with sixteen other men, two of whom were the owners of a six ton cutter, sail was set for the return to Vancouver. We carried a fair wind with us and were booming along at a good pace, when, just north of Alert Bay, on the Inside Passage between Vancouver Island and the mainland, we saw a large black object head for us. One of the owners of the boat hollered. "Here comes that damned blackfish" and gave us his record as a bad actor.

It seems Mr. Blackfish had upset more than one Siwash canoe and mangled up some of the Siwashes. A 45-70 Winchester was passed to a Naval Reserve man who let the blackfish come within about 100 feet and let it have two or three between the eyes. That was all possible, as the blackfish dived and nothing more was seen of it. It looked to be about 30 feet long and about three feet of his bulk was above the surface.

We had more to come by way of excitement. On the third night out we anchored in Canoe Bay just north of the Seymour Narrows. It was our custom to anchor every night as the Inside Passage was tricky, risky water to navigate even in daylight. The Seymour Narrows were not to be treated lightly. Most of the steamboats tackled them at slack water period only, the three-fourths hour after full ebb or full flood tide. At times there was an eight knot current. The

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tide runs in and around both the north and south ends of Vancouver Island, meeting a few miles below the Seymour Narrows at Cape Mudge. After consulting watches and tide tables, anchor was had up and with four men at each of our large sweeps we put out with yours truly at the tiller, instructed to steer close to the east shore as possible. The intention was to buck in against the last of the ebb tide, which we took it for granted we were doing, as driftwood and snags were to be seen moving north, on the west side. As a matter of fact, the flood tide was about two hours run, booming down the centre of the Narrows, still as glass, to strike the shore of the Island, eddying both to east and west. Our course was to turn east in the throat of the narrows. We did, and found the cutter going round and round in a monster whirlpool, but on the outer edge of it. Mention was made of taking to the punt we had in tow. It held four men. A farmer on the shore to the east of us saw our predicament, hustled along shore until close to us as we swept around, and said: "Get out into the main current if you can." After circling around several times on the outer edge of the whirlpool, by some vagary of water in violent motion, and with a flattening out of the whirlpool, aided by the men at the sweeps, we gained the main current which took hold and shot us out of a bad fix at a lively pace. The run of the tide took us in a hurry to where the tides met a few miles below at Cape Mudge. Talk about tide rips, there is where we got our money's worth. One day short of reaching Vancouver we remained at anchor all of one morning, no wind, and watched a whale battling one or more blackfish, about one-quarter mile off shore for several hours.

Making several trips up and down Seymour Narrows later I got a line on them. Some years previously a bunch of Siwashes, some Haidas and some Simochans, either in a spirit of tribal rivalry, on a bet, or under the influence of piawatch—booze—manned two twelve-man dugouts and tackled the Seymour Narrows. Rumour had it that none of them were ever seen again. I have still clearly in mind the picture of saw logs and monster snags disappearing in that whirlpool to be shot up maybe one-fourth mile below.

Harry Penhallurick.

A thrilling Saga of Western courage

SIX-GUN

Steve's nerves and muscles tensed to maintain that drunkard's pose when Duke Glore growled, "Buck, here's a good chance to throw a slug through that hombre's back."

CHAPTER I
Fighting Words!

UP THE wide street of Caribou swept a dozen whooping horsemen, guns streaking red spurts of fire toward the Wyoming stars that looked down upon the roaring, blazing boomtown which six months before had been but a whistle stop for cattle trains on the new branch line railroad.

Now it was bustling with activity.

The slim, blue-eyed girl, emerging from the busy Chicago Store across the way from the Mountain Lion Saloon, heard the high, wild shout of celebrating riders as the dusty, merry cavalcade stopped the cayuses at the hitch-rack.

"Cowboys in town!"

With short nose tilted disdainfully, Mary Lou Ramsay regarded this noisy, crowded place that so rapidly had changed since word went forth through the west that a treaty had been concluded with Striking Eagle's band of Indians on the nearby reservation. Soon, a vast area of land would be opened to settlement. Those who now crowded Caribou's plank walks were feverishly awaiting that word.

While these seekers of quick wealth waited, nimble wits of the town became rich by providing

FOOL

By WILLLIAM F. BRAGG

Fools rush in where angels fear to tread, but Steve Knight was neither a fool nor an angel; he was a relentless, bloodthirsty ranny grimly seeking the murderer of his father.

amusement, such as the bad cards and worse liquor in the Mountain Lion.

A crowd alive with the color of the frontier milled up and down the street, reluctantly stepping aside for reckless riders. The throng included bearded frontiersmen, stockmen, and miners from the Sweatwater range in the south to Sawtoothed Coppermine Mountain barring the north. Mary Lou's quick eyes, trained from childhood to read signs of beast and men, picked out the flashy tinhorns with their painted, laughing women; the boomers and drifters who followed every rush for land or gold; the older, sedate men of the merchant type content to make their gains over plank counters.

At any moment, word was expected from Washington that the land stood open for homesteading. For weeks, the hopeful ones had scanned plats, made their locations. While there would be no official time and start such as in the case of the Cherokee Strip, this Wyoming opening would reward efficiency and speed. All around Caribou, landseekers had located their fast saddle-horses, their buckboards with carefully greased wheels, awaiting the flash over the telegraph line. The stampede would begin, once the news was made public.

Mary Lou, daughter of a pioneer cattleman, having been raised on a large ranch, had little interest in the pulsing, colorful scene below the

store platform. Her eyes were for the shouting cowboys across the way.

She counted those romping, scuffling, clear-eyed boys as her friends, cowpunchers content a few months before to spend hard-earned wages on occasional trips to Calibou. Now, with excitement electric in the air, content had vanished.

"Broke all the time," Mary Lou said to the paunchy old man with the big red nose who had followed her from the store. "Look at them, Dad. Buck Graun will have most of their money by morning."

Judge Leffingwell K. Ramsay removed a long black cigar from his thin-lipped mouth, stuck out his chin decorated with a gray Van Dyke beard, and angrily regarded the whoopup scene so deplored by his pretty daughter.

"Drinking and gambling," the judge snorted. "Throwing their hard-earned money across Buck's tigerskin. Knowing dang well his faro game's crooked."

THE sharp shriek of steel, biting into iron, silenced the judge. A heavy wagon filled with baled hay lumbered down the street. On the high seat sat a stumpy driver, hat cocked on the side of his shock head, boot bearing heavily on the brake as he grandly swung his four-horse outfit to a halt in front of the Mountain Lion.

"That Stumpy!" Mary Lou sniffed. "The best rider in seven states! What's he doing with a load of hay?"

Wide-hatted men greeted Stumpy with yells, climbed up the wagon wheels, began to throw down the bales. A crowd swarmed from the blazing front of the Mountain Lion. Even big Buck Graun, the owner, glittering in a satin-fronted waistcoat with pink daisies embroidered thereon, followed to the walk.

Two panting barkeeps rolled out a keg of beer, stood it on end, began expert operations with a bung-starter while the buzzing crowd formed a ring.

Then a lean, rawboned cowpuncher jumped up on a bale of hay, snapped three shots into the air, and announced as the signal drew others to the Mountain Lion:

"The party's all on me! Steve Knight! For my good friend, Charley!"

"Yippee!" shouted the cowboys.

"Yippee!" Buck Graun agreed in his heavy bass voice.

Stumpy leaned merrily from his wagon seat, shouted. "It's Knight's night to howl!"

Buck Graun grinned under his heavy mustache.

"Kill him for that, Steve."

"Not until after my party."

Mary Lou swung, blue eyes blazing angrily. "Who is this friend, Charley?" she inquired of her stony-eyed father.

The judge blinked, bit the end off his cigar, then frowned as he read the flapping sign now being run up over the Mountain Lion entrance. It announced to all Caribou that Steve Knight, Stormy Steve, was host at this party, that everything would be free, for man or beast.

"Charley?" the judge said dubiously. "Never heard the name. Best friends Steve Knight has are those horse-thieves, Stumpy Smith and Doc Battle. Fellows he threw in with before his father got mad and ran him off the range."

Mary Lou shook her head, disputed the judge.

"Nobody ever proved Stumpy and Doc were rustlers."

"Too dang hard to catch, Mary Lou."

Mary Lou stormed. "In this country a man's innocent until proved guilty."

The judge sighed, lit a fresh cigar. She was a difficult child, very loyal to her friends. He meditated a quiet

walk up the side street to a little bar where he could drink bitters for his stomach's sake. Although his nose carried a rosy tinge, the judge seldom drank in such public places as the Mountain Lion. It might hurt his standing as a pundit of the huge Caribou range.

It was different though with that graceless scamp, Steve Knight. He quit his bale of hay, sauntered across the street, trailed his spurs up the platform steps. He doffed his wide hat, bowed like a courtier from the hips.

"Mary Lou," he drawled, a twinkle in his eyes. "You comin' to Charley's party? You and the judge?"

Before the girl could reply the judge asked stiffly:

"Who is Charley?"

Steve gestured toward the rangy sorrel pony that Stumpy was now leading up to the biggest bale of hay.

"That's Charley," he said.

The judge's face reddened. "You ungrateful fool," he rasped. "Are you throwing away the honor of a name left you by a fine father? Making yourself a laughing stock in your home town by giving a party for—a—*horse?*"

"Three years ago," Steve said, "Charley saved me from a blizzard. It's his birthday. Why shouldn't he have a party? I paid forty five dollars for a ton of that hay. Rather spend it on Charley than plenty men I've seen here an' thar'."

Mary Lou chimed in. "There's a time for all things, Steve. You're not acting like the boy I once knew in the days when your father was alive and running the Silvertip ranch. You spend most of your time spreeing in town, throwing away money that should go to restocking your range with cattle." Her voice was reproachful, rather than angry.

Steve grinned. "Mary Lou, I didn't come here for a lecture from you or your dad. I just asked you to come to Charley's party. I want all my friends to say hello to Charley Hoss."

"Bah!" stormed the judge, and turned on his heel. "You besotted fool!"

"Hard words, judge!"

"You drinking mate to horse-thieves!"

Steve's smile faded. His eyes flashed. He stepped toward the angry man, right hand sliding toward the gunbelt that sagged around his lean hips.

Mary Lou flashed between the men. She vented her anger on both.

"Dad!" she cried. "It's not right to insult Steve, nor accuse Stumpy and Doc of rustling."

"I go by what my eyes tell me."

She faced Steve. And now, her eyes were hidden from her father's gaze. Tears filled them. She spoke almost beseechingly to the lean, tanned rider in the cowhide vest, the wide hat, the batwing chaps.

"Steve—old friend of mine. If you're in trouble, don't try to drown your grief in the Mountain Lion. Our home's *always* open, Steve. Dad doesn't mean *all* he says."

Steve smiled on her. "Mary Lou," he said gently. "You always were square with your friends. Stumpy and Doc will enjoy hearing how you stood up for them."

"And you, Steve? Can't you—you straighten up? Looks to me, boy, like you've tangled up in your rope since you came home. Of course I know your father's sudden death—the way they killed him as he sat alone in the old ranch-house—was a shock. But, Stevie, if you want to track down those dirty killers, build up the Silvertip to what it was before, you *can't* do it by giving parties in town for horses."

From the Chicago Store doorway, a cool voice drawled:

"That's tellin' him, Mary Lou."

Steve swung on his high boots, frowned on the speaker who lounged

there in the shadow, the brim of his hat pulled down over greenish eyes behind slanting lids.

"Hello, Duke," he said softly. "You got a great habit of sneakin' up on a man when he ain't lookin'. Somethin' like a big lobo wolf, Duke."

Duke Glore, as rawboned and tall as Steve, but blessed with hair of a brassy yellow tint, and a slim blond mustache above shining white teeth, responded easily.

"Sorry you don't like the way I walk, Steve."

"It's all right with me. Only a more nervous gent might object."

"So yo're not nervous."

"Not tonight, Duke. Can't you read the sign? I'm celebratin'. Givin' a party for my hoss, Charley. See over the way."

A dozen cowponies were now ranged in front of the hay. Stumpy was busily passing out steins of beer to the owners and all who cared to join in the frolic.

GLORE, range foreman for Judge Ramsay's Twin Seven cattle spread, regarded the scene with a sneering smile. Then he shrugged, turned to the quiet girl, his angry employer.

"Let's go," he said curtly.

"To my party?" Steve asked.

The judge rasped. "No, you young fool. Out of town to our business. You may waste the talents and strength given you by the father they murdered. Spree around town with rustlers as your friends. But we have work to do. No—a thousand times—no."

"And that's final," Duke softly agreed. "I don't like to drink with horse-thieves."

Mary Lou screamed. "Duke! You lie!"

Steve Knight's right hand closed on the stock of his gun. The weapon was half clear of leather when Mary Lou seized his gun arm.

Duke Glore, swinging his back to the store wall, had his Colt flipping up for action. His right thumb turned white as it held back the big hammer.

Steve attempted to free his arm from Mary Lou's desperate grasp. She was crying to her father to intercede, to prevent this gunplay between men who should be friends, men who had ridden together on the Black Thunder ranges north of Caribou.

Duke rasped, never losing the set smile that revealed his white teeth.

"Step aside, Mary Lou. He asked for it, the drunken fool!"

Judge Ramsay stood rigid with what would pass in many places for fear. He made no move to jump between the hard-eyed men. That would have brought him into bullet line. And forty years on the Wyoming frontier, had taught the judge to avoid trouble like most men dodge the black smallpox.

Hampered by the girl, Steve stood at a disadvantage, until a long arm swooped from the store entrance and curling fingers closed so deeply on the gun arm of Duke Glore that he cursed with pain and dropped his gun.

A wild shot crashed out as the hammer struck the boards. Then Duke whirled, mad as a mountain lion with its foot in a trap.

A lanky puncher, craggy of feature, clad in dull black from hat to boots, stepped from the store. A huge six-gun sagged down his saddle-warped right leg but he made no move toward the weapon.

He dragged the furious Twin Seven foreman toward the store steps, tossed him down, stood there unsmiling, beady black eyes on the man who struggled to his boots below. His right thumb was now hooked down behind his cartridge belt.

Steve Knight said quietly. "Thanks, Doc. But I don't think it would have gone far." He kicked the Duke's gun after him.

"I heard him bust loose about

rustlers," Doc Battle growled. "I don't mind what they call me. But I hate hearin' reflections on my friends."

The judge was attempting to hustle Mary Lou from the platform. A curious crowd had gathered. He shook his fat fist under Steve's long nose.

"Not content," cried the judge, "with hellin' around. You and yore hoss-thief friends have to abuse honest men like Duke Glore! There's a law in Caribou, Steve Knight, and you'll find that it's enforced." His face was purplish red.

Steve answered grimly enough. "The law has moved danged slow in findin' out *who* killed my father."

CHAPTER II
The Law Speaks

A HUGE mob of dancers filled the polished floor of Buck Graun's Mountain Lion. The clock hands stood at one o'clock in the morning. All other places had closed. The whole town had come to Steve's party for Charley Hoss.

Steve Knight sat on sedate Charley Hoss in the rear of the noisy room, long leg hooked around his saddle-horn, lazy eyes on the whirling, laughing dancers. A battered guitar was cocked on his knee, and his rope-calloused fingers thumped out chords to one of the chants for which he was famous in Caribou and around any roundup camp-fire.

"Oh, take me back to the buff'ler days,
Elk steak fryin' in the camp-fire blaze,
An' antelope lurkin' in the prairie haze.
Then Injuns swooped
Coyotes snooped
An' sawed-off shotguns boopety-booped."

The frontier orchestra joined in strongly on the refrain which resembled the old tune, "Buffalo Gals."

Strong men, who hoped within a few days to make a new grubstake locating good land on the Indian reservation, swung their flirtatious partners, trotted them to the polished bar, rang their gold money on the mahogany.

Buck Graun, who as a special concession to the man who was throwing away a big wad of money on this party, had allowed Stormy Steve Knight to lead his pony into the Mountain Lion, leaned on the front end of the bar, a satisfied grin on his fat face.

Stumpy Smith, hair all mussed-up, stood on a bale of hay calling turns.

"Swing yore pardner! Alleman left!"

And red slippers clicked on the springy maple floor. And one tall puncher, catching his spur in the lacy hem of his fair partner's billowing skirt, tore three yards loose before the girl screamed and slapped him across his grinning mouth.

But it was fun for Caribou. So long as that lanky fool on the sorrel paid the bill.

NONE there who laughed so secretly at the careless Steve Knight understood that all this was a pose, that he played the fool and wastrel deliberately. He had quit this country long before the boom spirit changed it overnight from his quiet, old hometown to a tawdry center of cynical hilarity where pity was unknown—where most men and women had gone money crazy, and the law that ordinary decent men lived by was a thing to laugh at.

Steve had returned to all this after receiving word that his father, brave old soldier, rancher, and pioneer, had been shot down as he sat alone in his ranch home. Grief had been heavy in Steve's heart because he had parted in anger from that father when he refused to quit his two friends who were suspected of being clever cattle and horse thieves.

They had ridden away toward Texas, the three comrades. And they had come back.

They laughed and jested tonight, but their careless eyes were sharp, and though they might speak thickly as though far gone on Buck Graun's rotgut liquor, their brains were clear.

The lax law had failed to reveal the murderer of the elder Knight. This careless manner, this helling around, had been deliberately adopted by Steve and his mates to uncover the killer trail.

They knew well enough that a cold and deadly plot lay behind the killing of old Knight who was, at his death, reputedly a wealthy man with large land and cattle holdings.

Arrayed against such cunning human wolves, Steve and his friends therefore played the part of fools, hoping thus to allay any suspicion which might have been aroused in their unknown enemies if they had grimly announced they were back for revenge.

Steve stared at the huge crowd, that land-crazed mob, the roaring men, the laughing, quick-eyed women. Five hundred danced there, all on his money, but who could he count on as friends?

His face wore a wide smile, but his eyes were hard as stone. His lips framed the merry words of his song but no laughter echoed in his heavy heart. He had played this game for six months, and it wearied him.

How he had longed there on the store platform to open his heart to Mary Lou, unburden his tired soul of his trouble—of the grief that racked him when he was alone for the father who had been sent treacherously across the Big Divide.

Down there lounged Buck Graun, a friend to any man so long as the man had money. And on the platform, Duke Glore had been swift to pass sneering words that had almost resulted in a gunfight.

Steve silently cursed his anger. He shouldn't have given way to his passion. For Duke Glore was the sort of handsome tricky scoundrel who could fit easily enough into a rangeland murder plot. Fit in with such buccaneers as Graun in his fancy vest.

And Duke was clever enough perhaps to see that no witless fool would have flared up and gone for a gun as Steve Knight had.

THEN he sighted the man who was heavy on his mind. The Duke waltzed past, arms around the slim waist of a petite little girl. Gaily she waved to Steve. Smilingly, he returned the signal.

"Flo looks right pretty tonight," observed old Doc Battle, lounging near Steve under the overhang of the balcony.

"She always looks pretty when Duke's dancin' with her."

Doc frowned. "Women are dang

queer. To think of a fine little gal like Flo throwin' herself away on a false alarm like Duke Glore."

Steve nodded. "But mebbe Flo thinks he's a relief after she's shot biscuits all day in the Gem Cafay."

He counted the pretty blond, Flo Dupont, as his friend. One of the few, men or women, who danced to his music. She was reputed to own a half interest in the Gem, and to serve the best pie west of Fort Laramie.

Half the men there would have given a month's wages for a smile or a kiss from Flo Dupont. But the handsome, hard-riding Duke Glore, boss of the huge Twin Seven outfit, had won her smiles, her heart. A pity, too, for Duke had a careless way with women. And both Steve and Doc knew that many an honest, hard working girl had been started down the primrose path by Duke's shallow promises, his lack of heart and faith.

"Wouldn't be so danged bad," growled Doc, "if Flo wasn't workin' hard and savin' her money to educate her little brother."

Steve ended his guitar strumming, let the orchestra carry on while he studied the rouged face of Flo Dupont. She didn't look so fresh and pretty as she had appeared a few weeks ago.

"Talk's around," observed Doc, "that Duke has sot his han'some eyes on Mary Lou—"

Steve flashed out angrily. "Doc—"

But his friend growled stubbornly. "Don't bury yore head like an ostrich, Steve. I reckon it's a fact. An' if this play we're workin' don't come to a head right quick, Duke's right apt to throw his loop around Mary Lou. Which would be a damned shame."

Steve choked down his anger at mention of Mary Lou's name in such a joint as the Mountain Lion. Doc spoke the bitter truth. He confessed that he loved the girl, and loved her since they went together, as tiny kids, to the little old log cabin school near their ranch homes north of town. Then their fathers had been the best of friends. No clouds had been on the horizon.

But now, playing the part of rascal and fool, seeking those who had murdered Captain Steve Knight, the original "Stormy" of the Caribou country, Steve realized that he might lose any respect, any affection, that the Ramsay heiress held for him.

But he couldn't back down, not even for love. His jaw tightened grimly. And his right hand, sliding beneath his guitar, closed on the long six-gun slung from his belt.

The dance ended. Buck Graun mounted a chair, announced loudly in his heavy bass that the last keg had been tapped.

"And folks," he went on, "we're past the time limit now on stayin' open."

Stumpy yelled. "What you drivin' at, Buck?"

"Law an' order has come to Caribou," Buck laughed. "They figure we orter to close long enough to sweep out and bury the dead. There's a committee functionin' with Sime Redwin as the chairman. Sorta vigilante outfit backin' up our night marshal, Tom Botts. They set one o'clock in the mornin' as pipe down for games an' red-eye. So, Folks—one more round."

Duke Glore, pausing near a table not far from Steve and Doc, pushed Flo into a vacant chair. He chucked her dimpled chin, smiled lazily.

"Open them pretty blue eyes," he coaxed. "Some of Buck's red-eye will shore wake you up."

Flo shook her head. "No drinks, Duke. I just came here to dance. I've got a job facing me bright and early in the morning."

Duke's smile faded. "Yo're slowin' up," he growled, drawing away.

Flo sprang from her chair, took Duke's sleeve, sought to draw him back to the table. He resisted, declaring that he would seek a lively partner who wasn't worrying about

washing dishes in a greasy spoon cafe.

"Duke," the girl cried, and her voice carried to Steve and Doc, "what's come over you lately? You didn't talk this way a few weeks ago. Duke—" Her small, work-reddened hand clutched his sleeve the tighter. "Duke—it ain't true what folks are sayin'."

"Sayin' what?"

"That—that you're sweet on that Ramsay girl. Duke—" her eyes misted, "if I thought you were ready to turn me down, after—after all you've promised, Duke, I—I think I'd go crazy."

She was up on her tiny high-heeled slippers now, careless in her grief of all eyes. She clung to Duke, pleaded with him to remember the faith and the love he had pledged her.

The Twin Seven foreman roughly flung her slight body from him so brutally that Flo stumbled and would have fallen to the floor if Doc Battle hadn't lunged forward and caught her.

Duke Glore, steadily drinking all night, reckless because he had been bested in the fight in front of the Chicago Store, freed his six-gun, swung on Doc who faced him, unable to draw iron because Flo was in his arms.

"By God!" cried Duke. "Yo're always showin' up where you ain't wanted. It's about time I wound up yore clock!"

Flo Dupont's face whitened. The rouge on her lips stood out like a streak of blood.

"Duke," she screamed. "Put up that gun!"

"Stand away from him, you biscuit rassler!" he flamed. "Stand away!"

But the girl wouldn't move. She offered her graceful body as a living shield between old Doc and the man who faced them with a cocked gun in his hand.

Every eye in the Mountain Lion was now turned toward the scene just under the overhang of the balcony.

There was not time nor space to reach Duke before he fired a murder bullet. Nor did men dare to shout, plead, or draw iron.

Buck Graun stood at the far end of his bar, pudgy hands turning white as they gripped the edge of the counter. He bit through his black cigar, muttered over and over:

"The damn fool! Blowin' the works over a girl. The damn fool—"

And what irked Buck was that the only man within easy distance of Duke Glore was Steve Knight, rated throughout Caribou as a careless, hard-drinking fool.

No, men couldn't count on Steve to interfere. For he was sitting there, carelessly at his ease on his horse, even a trace of a smile flitted across his lantern-jawed face.

"Throw that girl aside," Duke stormed, advancing a step. "Then—go for yore iron!"

THUS he opened his way out. When Doc reached for his gun, Duke would shoot him down like a dog, assert self-defense, and likely enough, win his point. For, during these boom days in Caribou, men's minds ran more to quick wealth, to plans for the looming land rush, than to such small details as murder. A reasonable excuse for a killing was enough to clear most citizens. Or so it had been until Buck's announcement concerning the new vigilance committee headed by Sime Redwin, one of the town's leading merchants.

Little Flo pleaded in a choked voice for Doc's life.

"Duke," she sobbed, "you ain't the same fellow who said once that he loved me, wanted to marry me. You're looking at me now with eyes red with the whiskey light. Duke—you're too much of a man to kill old Doc like he was a yaller dog."

Duke snarled, green eyes glittering. "If you don't get out of the way, I'm likely to bust you too."

She said between her teeth. "I won't stand aside. Shoot and be damned."

"Then—" And Duke's gun started sliding down.

But a six-gun roared. A bullet clanged against the steel frame of Duke's gun, tore it from his hand, hurled it clattering to the floor.

Crazed with agony, Duke gripped his shocked right hand, whirled to face Steve Knight.

"Damn you!" he raged. "Cuttin' in foul."

Steve looked dismayed. "Sorry, Duke," he apologized. "I don't know what happened to this gun of mine. I was jest sittin' here, and somehow the thing was in my hand. And then—" he grinned sheepishly, "it went off all of sudden. If I hurt yore hand, I shore feel bad, Duke. Both me and my Charley Hoss, we feel *terrible* bad."

Duke bent to pick up his gun.

But old Doc Battle now stepped forward, put a boot on it.

"You," growled Doc, "had better drift before another gun goes off," he spaced his words out, "accidental."

Duke crouched there, aflame with his anger, burning with the pain of the hot blood returning to his numbed right hand. Slowly his red-flecked eyes roved from grim Doc to grinning Steve on the sorrel horse.

"Twice tonight," declared Duke, "you two have jumped me. Twice too many times."

"Well," drawled Steve, "you got only yourself to blame, Duke."

"Why?"

"In lots of ways, you was actin' pretty damned prevalent."

"Just talkin' truth when I say you've throwed in with this black-muzzled hoss-thief and that stubby Smith hombre tuh steal back cattle for the Silvertip outfit."

Doc Battle reached out his long arm, tapped Duke across his shaven chin with the front sight of his gun. The Twin Seven foreman broke at the knees, fell to the floor, lay there like a dead man.

With a scream, Flo flung her slim body down beside him. She pleaded with him to open his eyes.

Doc stood there, a disgusted look on his hard face.

"Women," he grumbled, "women. The way they'll love a danged coyote."

Duke sat up groggily. His eyes fell on Flo. He pushed her aside. She fell.

"Git away from me," he rasped. "Yo're always draggin' me into trouble."

She reeled to her feet, stood swaying. Doc Battle flung his arm around her, led her toward the rear door where she could slip out and run up

the alley to her room in the rear of the Gem Cafe.

She sobbed her farewell to Duke who stood glowering. "You're through with me forever. Go back to your high-toned friends."

Duke grinned although his chin was swelling rapidly. "A fine girl like Miss Ramsay," he began, "wouldn't talk thata way in such a joint."

A rude hand fell on his collar. He was whirled around. He stared into the eyes of Steve Knight, into eyes no longer calm and twinkling.

"Duke," the puncher drawled, "Doc didn't hit high enough to close yore ugly mouth." And from belt level, Steve swung a blow that knocked three shiny front teeth loose in Duke's mouth. The Twin Seven boss reeled backwards, crashed against a balcony post, fell in a twitching heap on the polished floor.

The crowd roared. Buck Graun led a half dozen hounders toward the fight, shouting that his place wasn't the spot for murder.

Stumpy Smith, weaving all this while on the flanks of the crowd, suddenly faced the oncoming crowd, six-gun snaking into sight from under his vest. He lined on the middle button of Buck's satin vest.

"One more bleat outa you," said Stumpy, "and I'll shoot all the daisies off yore fancy westcut—"

Then, from the front of the Mountain Lion, there sounded a loud shout.

"In the name of the law; this place closes instant!"

THE crowd gave way before the two men who advanced across the polished floor. One who walked on the right was of stocky-build, gray of hair and mustache, and wore a silver star on his vest.

This was Tom Botts, old timer, and city marshal of Caribou.

Beside him strode a man as long-legged as a sandhill crane, his lathy frame attired in a dull, drab suit of pepper-and-salt hue. Steel-rimmed spectacles, hanging far down on his long nose, hid his peering, hard eyes.

Strangest of all, on his narrow head, he wore a derby hat. Only one man in Caribou, that mecca of land rushers, of stampeders after fast money, dared wear such a lid.

This man was Sime Redwin, richest citizen in Caribou and, as Buck Graun had often stated, the man to whom most of the town owed money. For that reason above all, his fellow citizens suffered the derby hat.

Redwin eyed Steve Knight.

"I heard," he said dryly, "that Knight was giving a party for a horse. I didn't believe it. But that's a small matter. The vigilance committee decided today that all saloons and gambling houses must close at one o'clock in the morning. You agreed to that, Graun."

Buck, who owed a few dollars to Redwin, sheepishly agreed.

"Another reason for closing," Redwin went on calmly. "This county will hold its election the day after tomorrow for its first sheriff. Judge Ramsay, an honored citizen, has consented to become a candidate. We are hopeful," Redwin turned his scornful gaze on Steve Knight, "that the judge, when elected, will make more progress in running down the murderer of Steve Knight's father than the son has. But of course—undertaking such duty would interfere with fun like giving parties—" Redwin was sneering openly, "for horses."

Steve Knight never batted an eye. "And that's whatever, Mister Redwin," he said calmly. "I hope the judge wins out."

CHAPTER III
Bluff

ALONE in the rambling old ranch-house constructed from the adobe remains of Camp Gatling, a

former frontier military post on the east bank of Black Thunder River, Steve Knight sat in the huge chair covered with rawhide and elkskin, his father's chair, and for perhaps the hundredth time within six months considered the death—the sudden death of his father.

In this room, this very chair, on a blustery morning in early December, a wandering cowpuncher from the Twin Seven to the east had discovered Captain Knight's body. A later investigation by Dr. Sands, the physician and coroner hurriedly called from Caribou, twelve miles south, had established that he had been struck over the head with some type of club. The weapon had not been found. But Dr. Sands, later detailing all this to Steve when the latter returned hurriedly a few days after the killing, said the captain had apparently received visitors from the reservation the night of his death, because searchers had found a few moccasin tracks in the light fall of snow blown on the boards of the porch which ran across the north side of the old home.

So had died the first Stormy Knight, a man who had come to the west during hostile Indian days as a young officer of cavalry, borne his share of hard fighting against Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapahoe, and allied tribes, received a slug from an Indian's trade musket in his right leg which he carried to his solitary grave down under the tall whispering cottonwoods above the bank of the river.

There was no smile now on Steve's face as he arose and began a restless pacing of the long room, the room he had known so well since his father had brought him here, a motherless little chap.

They had loved each other well, the stern, unsmiling frontier veteran, the impulsive boy who was more like the gentle mother, the dark-eyed girl who had given her life to present Captain Knight with an heir. In later years, it seemed to Steve that perhaps the wall, which his father had erected between them, was because of his mother's death after his birth. There had been other things. The captain wished Steve to enter West Point, become an officer and a gentleman. Instead, the boy preferred the wild life of the plains and mountains, the companionship of camp-fires, the friendship, the laughter, even the brawling of such strong and heady spirits as Stumpy Smith and Doc Battle. A day had come when there was an open break between neighbors like Judge Ramsay and Simeon Redwin who declared Stumpy and Doc were prospering by rustling cattle, doing it so expertly they could not be trapped.

Steve stood facing the eastern wall on which hung a picture of his father in military uniform. His parent wore a valiant cavalry mustache, with hands in gauntlets clasped over the head of a sabre, alert eyes turned toward the west, looking across Black Thunder River toward the agency on the Red Rock reservation to where his aged and respected foeman, Striking Eagle, chief of the Wahacanka band, had set his lodges after smoking the final peace pipe after the roundup of hostiles by Crook and his men along the Powder River and the Rosebud.

Also on that wall hung a varied collection of Indian trophies; bows, quivers of arrows, gorgeous trailing war bonnets, knives ground from blacksmiths' files and hid in beaded cases, a hunting shirt of doeskin, almost as soft and white as silk. Its leather had been chewed into silkiness through weeks of work by the patient squaw who had made it.

As a boy, Steve had longed to take down and play with those trophies. But this was not permitted by the captain. The old soldier valued them. They had been given to him by Striking Eagle, given as a mark of respect and friendship because, on a red and final battlefield, the captain had inter-

fered as the chief lay on the ground, a bullet through his painted body, a lean leg trapped under a dead war pony. He had flung his body in its cavalry blue between the fierce war chief mumbling his death song, and an Indian ally scout as the latter lined a musket to drive a death slug into the man on the ground. So Captain Knight had stopped the bullet intended for Striking Eagle, and carried it to his grave. Only veterans of the frontier knew the story, for men like the captain and the chief were not types to talk about joys or troubles.

"It don't ring true," whispered Steve, staring at those trophies. His eyes came to rest finally on the huge round shield of thick buffalo bull hide which occupied the center of the collection. This shield bore the Indian style coat of arms of Striking Eagle, a crude effigy in mineral paint of red and blue, of a bald eagle flashing toward the earth with wings spread widely and talons opened to sink into the shrinking back of some tiny meat animal. Thus, in the early days, the chief and his young warriors had struck at his foes, red and white alike.

"No Indian," Steve whispered, "would have knocked Dad in the head. They valued him as an older brother. They came here often and he fed them. They put up their lodges down by the river, down there where he's buried now. Why should they kill him?"

BUT evidence couldn't be disputed. That was why leading men today scorned Steve Knight. Butchered cattle bearing the Cross K brand of the Knights had been discovered on the west bank of Black Thunder River shortly before the death of the captain. There were, among the Indians of the Red Rock band, good men as well as bad. It was a fact that the captain had conferred with the agent, the old chief, for he was a generous man but jealous of his property rights. So on the basis of the moccasin tracks, men like Redwin, Judge Ramsay, Dr. Sands, believed one of the red thieves had come by night to visit the captain, been received as a friend, struck down the old rancher as he sat off guard in his elkskin chair, struck him down with a club.

"A certain club," said Steve, eyes roving over the collection of Indian trinkets. "I remember everything that used to hang on the wall. There was a war maul, a club with a round stone head knotted to a hickory stick handle with strings of deer sinew and buckskin. I'd know it anywhere, because it was the club Striking Eagle carried in his last fight with the whites. The one with which he always cracked in the skull of a hated enemy."

That past winter had been one of starvation. It had killed and scattered the stock of the ranchers. Now it was the first day in June, but Steve and his two friends, Stumpy, and Doc had not yet made a full gather of the Cross K herd. They had found carcasses in every gulch, some bearing their ranch iron, others from the Twin Seven and a dozen other outfits of the Caribou country. Steve knew well enough that to date the herd was fifty per cent short of its usual tally. He suspected that a storm hadn't killed all the cows and young steers.

"Starving men," he reflected, "will go any route to get food."

He pictured winter winds sweeping around the mud-daubed shacks, the swaying lodges of gaunt, starving Indians across the river. The buffalo had gone. The government fed them but they needed fat meat in the winter. The herd of the Cross K offered the nearest food for life. Steve shook his head stubbornly. He knew Striking Eagle well. The old man—even with death looming over his people—would not have permitted the killing of a man he counted as a blood brother.

Steve walked to the huge double window which permitted a view toward the towering height of Coppermine Mountain in the north, the misty rims, the tall spire of Signal Point a few miles west looming over the vast gorge where the swift river cut its way through the mineral-streaked range. It was a broad land, fierce of sun and storm, but a square land. A man was forced to fight always for what he enjoyed in life. But if he measured up, when he died, he went out fair and square. Captain Stormy Knight had fought fairly. But he had died a devilish death, struck down suddenly by the hand of some assassin he counted as a friend.

"No enemy would have made Dad sit in a chair and take a smash over the head," Steve speculated. "If it had been an enemy, this room would have shown signs of a fight to Doc Sands and Redwin when they got here."

Another angle had arisen to trouble Steve upon his return from Texas. He possessed no legal title to his father's estate. No will had been found naming him as the heir. The court recalled too that father and son had parted in bitter anger. For when called upon to break his friendship with Stumpy and Doc because they were suspected of stealing cattle, Steve had quietly refused, walked from this house without a farewell handshake from his father, mounted his pet Charley horse, gone to Texas to work for his living along with his two friends. They had cursed him strongly for his stupid loyalty to old friends, but they had loved him for it.

"What's back of it?" groaned Steve. "Outside of starvin' Injuns—who *would* kill my father? So far as I know, he had no more enemies than the average old timer. None who would knock in his head with a war club."

On the wall hung a huge map of the Caribou country, one drawn up in precise military fashion by the captain when he first ran his fences on the east shore of the Black Thunder. Here were outlined the spreading acres to the east with Bear Creek as a boundary of the Twin Seven. Mary Lou lived there with her father. Then to the west, across the river, below the canyon, lay a vast and fertile flat where the river, emerging from its narrow canyon, laden in spring flood time with rich silt, had built up land on which buffalo grass grew rankly. The west spur of Coppermine Mountain ran north with Signal Point, favored lookout of Striking Eagle's band in the old days, as its landmark. Good showing of copper had been found to the east. Steve suspected that within the Indian land the same mineral would show.

That had brought the railroad to Caribou. For months, efforts had been made to purchase from the Indians the copper hills around Signal Point, and the rich grass range below the canyon in order to throw it open for homesteading. Rumor ran in town that this would soon be accomplished.

Thus, the avid land-seekers awaited favorable word to start a mad race from town, over Black Thunder by way of Knight's Crossing below the ranch, to choice locations on this great tract of thirty square miles.

Steve studied that map. The effort to make out a motive for his father's death, beyond that of a mere murder by a starving Indian, made his face look old. For though he didn't wish to believe it, the map indicated that Judge Ramsay stood surest of any man to benefit by the captain's death. A cloud on the title would throw the Knight lands into court for a forced —and therefore—a ruinous sale to pay off creditors.

"If the judge could get our range," whispered Steve, "and then—by buyin' out rights of new homesteaders across the river—extend west, he'd have the greatest cattle spread in the west. Enough grass to fatten ten thousand

longhorns for market each year. The chance too of coal and copper around Signal Point."

But he couldn't believe the judge would subscribe to such a murderous plot. He didn't like the pompous old man whose sole right to the title was because he had once been a justice of the peace in Caribou. But the judge and his father had settled their ranches about the same year, been friends from the time their children had been toddling infants. No, Judge Ramsay indicated by the bitterness with which he reproached Steve for being a witless fool and a coward, that he was not the murderer or tied up in the plot.

Steve sighed. He buckled on his gunbelt, pulled on his chaps, started for the doorway in the rear, intending to go down and saddle up Charley. Stumpy and Doc were abroad on the range, working off the heavy headiness of the party the night before, striving to gather a few more Cross K cattle.

STRIDING toward the corral where Charley Hoss was digging his spotted nose into a feed rack, Steve heard a sound within the grove of trees by the side of the river. He halted, then entered the quiet timber with the leafy boughs of June cutting off the hot noon heat. There, by the grave of his father, staring down at the rough board headstone manufactured from the endgate of a wagon and with epitaph burned thereon by a heated running iron, stood an old, old man who wore a faded blue cavalry blouse, patched and floppy overalls, a tall black hat on his head, a pair of knee-high moccasins on his feet.

The man was singing. Steve stood watching him. He saw a skinny brown hand throw dust into the air, then toward the ground.

Steve didn't interrupt the ceremony until he saw the old man remove his hat, and throw a handfull of dust from the grave over his shock of coarse, black hair streaked with broad bands of gray.

Then Steve strode forward, spurs jingling, gun holster banging against his right thigh. He too had taken off his hat. He held it in his left hand. His right was held up, palm outward, the sign of peace on the great plains.

"Striking Eagle," he said softly, "you have come to mourn?"

The old man swung around. Black paint streaked his wrinkled face which was as finely-cut as that of a desert Arab. His long braids of hair were wrapped in weasel skins. Around his neck he wore a necklace of white sea-shells that had come from the far Pacific, brought across the trade trails in days of which the white man has no historic record.

The old man gathered a red blanket about his bony frame, folded his arms, regarded Steve with wise old eyes almost hidden under projecting brows. A long moment those eyes regarded this son of the man Striking Eagle had claimed as a blood brother. They seemed to Steve, that moment, to pierce his heart. Striking Eagle went through the ceremony of mourning; casting dust to the spirits of sky, above land, and below. He wore black paint for the dead. But in his eyes was no trace of grief's moisture. No, there shone deep in beady depths, the tiny red light of rage held in leash, a killer rage, the heady blazing wrath that in the olden days had sent Striking Eagle full tilt in all his glory of feathers and war paint against the blazing guns of blue-clad troopers, and the poisoned-tipped war arrows of red foemen.

"New moon come," the chief grunted, "I come here. This man," he nodded toward the grave, "he my brother. He carry my shield long time."

The bullhide war shield had been given to the captain by the chief when he surrendered and went on the res-

ervation under military guard. With the shield, the chief's honor went into the keeping of a friend. It was the highest tribute a chief could pay.

"He save me," Striking Eagle went on gravely in his halting English, words picked up from the missionary teachers. "He feed my people later when all wild meat gone. All my friends, they die. We are alone. Then he die on a night when wind blow hard with snow in it from Signal Point."

"How you know wind blow that night?"

Striking Eagle said, "That day before, we hunt together. Last day white man let us kill deer, elk. Up on mountain. We shake hands that night on west bank river. Last time I see him. We kill two elk that day. He give all meat to me. He cross river. Then I hear he is dead. Now I am alone. I mourn."

She sat on a mountaintop watching the posse search for her.

Steve whispered. "Chief, you have heard talk of how he died?"

Striking Eagle's eyes flashed. "I hear. *You believe?*"

Steve held out his right hand. "No," he declared. "I don't believe what they say. That one of your people killed a friend."

Striking Eagle took Steve's hand. He gripped it.

"I go now," he declared. "Sometime we work out this blind trail. So long." And he strode down toward the brush along the river, red blanket flapping, tall black hat level on his gray hair.

FIFTEEN minutes later, Steve was just leading Charley out the corral gate when a rider dashed up on a panting buckskin pony. It was Mary Lou Ramsay. She wore a leather riding habit; blouse, short skirt to the tops of her knee-high boots, bright spurs on the high heels.

"Steve!" she cried, "Throw in your spurs! Ride for the hills while there's time!"

Steve creased his features in the happy-go-lucky grin with which he hoped to delude his father's killers into the belief he was a weak and empty-headed fool, a man not to be feared.

"Charley's tired," he drawled. "He tells me he don't feel like climbin' hills!"

"Steve!" the girl's dark eyes filled with angry tears. She swung her pony nearer Charley, poised a rawhide quirt. "Steve — won't you ever wake up? Why aren't you the boy you were before you went to Texas? You sit there grinning when they're coming to get you—" Her voice broke off as she sobbed.

Across the river there rang out a crash of gunfire, then a roaring shout of men. Steve turned, looked toward the river. Brush hid the approaches from the stream but he could hear splashing as galloping horses struck shallow water.

"I was out with Dad!" cried Mary Lou. "We crossed the river below. Several punchers with us. Duke Glore and others. We topped a hill, saw Doc Battle standing over a steer that he had hogtied. Duke knew the animal by its fleshmarks. He drew his gun, yelled for Doc to put up his hands. Doc ran for his horse. Duke shot him as he climbed into the saddle. A sec-

ond bullet, fired by my father, killed the steer. They skinned it."

"What become of Doc?"

"He circled into the hills. I slipped away, rode to warn you. Duke and my father swear you're all mixed up in the rustling of Twin Seven cattle."

Horsemen were coming through the timber. A strange look came to Mary Lou's face. She stared past Steve into the hay corral. He turned his head and quit smiling.

He saw a lanky man, with face white as alkali behind a black mustache, slip under the far rails of the corral, stumble toward the feed-rack in the center. It was Doc Battle. He gripped his smoking gun in his right hand. A stream of blood trailed from his left sleeve. A dozen horses in the corral snorted and ran away from the hay toward the rails farthest from staggering Doc. Horses, like wild cattle, fear the smell of blood.

Five minutes later, when Judge Ramsay and Duke Glore led a dozen horsemen up to the corral, they discovered Steve Knight standing by the feed-rack and spinning a rope while the dozen ponies hustled around him like a school of minnows.

Steve wasn't attempting to rope from a natural position. For a moment, the mounted men regarded him. First Steve threw his loop over his head with back toward his four-footed targets. Then he attempted to stand on his head. When he tumbled and fell over, Duke Glore choked out. "That damn fool ain't got sense enough to steal our cattle."

"Ropin' hosses standin' on his head," grunted Judge Ramsay. "He should be sent to the insane asylum."

But Glore snarled. "Doc and Stumpy *know* enough to blotch brands like they did on this hide." His eyes were blazing.

Steve strolled toward the grim-faced men, coiling his rope. Now, in the corral, there was no trace of the red trail from the rails to the feed-rack. The hoofs of racing ponies had erased that bloody path.

Steve looked vacantly at the hair side of the beef hide that Duke threw on the ground. He saw plainly enough the fresh black lines where the Twin Seven had been deftly converted into the Cross K.

"We caught yore friend, Doc, dead to rights," snarled Duke, "right after he had roped this critter."

"A nice job of blottin'," drawled Steve, cocking a wise eye, "any fool —even me—can see where they turned the judge's brand into the Knight mark. I hope you put out the fire—"

The judge reddened. "What fire?"

"Why the fire that Doc was usin' to heat his runnin' iron."

The punchers, behind the judge and Duke Glore, looked uneasy. In their dash to overtake Doc, they hadn't reflected that a rustler couldn't work over a brand without a hot iron.

"By Glory," said one. "There *wasn't* any fire!"

Duke Glore stormed. "Doc was gettin' ready to butcher this critter. The blottin' is at least a week old. It's peelin' off. Doc could make fifty dollars sellin' the beef in Caribou. We caught Doc. He come this way. I reckon he's hid around this place and we want him." His gun suddenly appeared, lined on Steve. "And yo're the man," said Duke, "who can lead us to him?"

Steve grinned, began to shake out his rope. "Duke," he said, "put up yore gun. I did see Doc. He come by here and he put a gun on me. He stole my hoss, Charley. And he headed east like a bat outa hell. That was why I was ropin' me another mount."

Duke grunted, not believing Steve. But cowboys, galloping around the fence, found the freshly gouged tracks of a pony pointing at full gallop toward the east. Tracks made within the past five minutes.

"Anyway," snarled Duke, "yo're our prisoner on the evidence of that beef

hide with the Twin Seven worked into yore brand. We'll take you to town for trial."

Steve nodded. "I wouldn't want to bust up yore plans," he said mildly. "But I got to ride. I can't walk. My hoss is gone. So I'll rope me another."

While they watched in anger that turned to sharp amazement, he sauntered over to the rack, turned his back toward the pointed heads of the ponies, hurled his loop carelessly over his head. He was glad they were not watching his face when the noose slid over the ears of a galloping buckskin. That lucky snare was as great a surprise to Steve as Duke Glore and the judge.

"Boys!" he cried, turning a happy, laughing face toward them, "I've been tryin' for six months to learn to rope backwards. That's the first time I ever hit the target. You boys shore brought me luck."

"The fool," grunted Judge Ramsay. "Wasting time on tricks while an honored father rests unavenged in his grave."

Duke Glore nodded, eyes savagely watchful as Steve took a spare saddle from the fence. "Looks like he's plumb locoed. Never heard of a workin' cowman tryin' to rope thataway."

"By Gosh," an admiring Twin Seven puncher interrupted. "He may be plumb locoed, but he made the riffle after six months' tryin'. He shore roped that buckskin a hull lot."

CHAPTER IV
Merciless Justice

THEY held Stormy Steve's hearing on charges of cattle rustling and horse stealing in Caribou late that afternoon.

Judge Ramsay and Duke Glore had discovered to their rage after the corral dust settled, that Steve had roped the favorite buckskin pony of Mary Lou, even cinched her saddle down on the cayuse's back while they waited. They had searched every building on the ranch, scouted out the timber, sent riders on the broad trail of the fugitive heading toward the east—without result. Steve had said honestly enough that the buckskin had come to his place about noon with the saddle on its back. That he had put it in the hay corral. That he didn't know the present whereabouts of the girl. So the purple-faced judge, uncertain as to whether Steve was telling the truth or merely trying out another wild joke, had sent other riders from his ranch to scour the west bank of the river where Glore had thrown a bullet into Doc, and where Mary Lou had dropped from sight as the excited riders circled after the wounded man into the rough hills below Signal Point.

Steve didn't tell them that Mary Lou, despite his protests, had dropped off the buckskin, mounted Charley Horse, fled eastward to print the trail which would be classed as that of Doc Battle.

Meanwhile Steve had hidden Doc under the hay in the rack. The wounded man was thus within a few yards of those who pursued him while Steve went through his crazy antics of roping a horse backwards. Their amazement at that trick—the discovery he was putting his loop on Mary Lou's horse—had served to turn attention away from the corral. No sane man would have hidden a wounded friend there within a few feet of vengeful guns. No, they suspected Steve had given his top mount to Doc and sent him on his way. They laughed at Steve's allegation that Doc had taken the horse at gun's point. No gun, they knew, was needed between Steve and his reputed outlaw friends.

As the county was a new one, organized since the coming of the railroad, Tom Botts, town marshal, served as acting sheriff. The election on the morrow would relieve him of

this job he detested. For Tom had put town lard on his ribs and didn't care to hold down a county job of riding the range.

The hearing of Steve was called in the Chicago Store, one of Sime Redwin's ventures in Caribou. Another merchant ran it but everybody knew Redwin had put up the first capital and was the silent—and as always—the biggest partner.

The store was a long narrow room with counters running down each side. Midway stood a tall cooler in which could be hung three beef carcasses on iron hooks. Men of Caribou ate lots of red meat. During the winter, ice was cut in the river and the cakes stacked around the cell-like cooler. The heavy door could be closed to keep out flies—and prowling Indians in town for trading—with a heavy iron bolt that slipped into a slot. Several times that bolt had caused some amusement in Caribou. Once the store-keeper was within the cooler cutting steaks, had been locked inside by some jocular puncher, and kept there until his teeth chattered and he shouted that he could stand a round of drinks.

Steve sat on the counter near a board wicket in the rear, behind which Sime Redwin had his desk and tall iron safe, and where he conducted his many ventures. The grim-faced power of Caribou range sat there, busy with his ledgers while cattlemen and citizens crowded the store and heard Duke Glore give evidence against Steve and his friends based on the beef hide.

The judge wasn't present. He was abroad, seeking his lost daughter. He had sworn, if she wasn't found within a few hours, to ride to town and string Steve Knight from the nearest tree.

The bald-headed boss barber from the Okay Shop, the town justice of the peace since Judge Ramsay had resigned to run for sheriff, conducted the hearing. Steve sat grinning, careless of the cold looks given him by the cattlemen who had known his father, who could not believe a Knight would sit there with a foolish grin on his face and be called a cow thief. To them, it was unbelievable.

AS the barber hemmed and hawed, considering the evidence, old Striking Eagle temporarily broke up the hearing. He stumped through the crowd, all in a rage, hawk's feather quivering in his black hat.

"He no stealum cow!" Eagle roared. "Me seeum who steal cow." He stalked toward the Justice of the Peace.

Duke Glore jumped up, grabbed Striking Eagle by his blanket, roared to his punchers. "Throw this drunken feather duster out."

They hustled the chief toward the door. But suddenly the old man whirled, drew a war club from under his blanket, began to strike out heartily. Within a split second, a tall column of stacked-up tomato cans collapsed as the swarm of fighters around the chief crashed against the counter. The barber was pounding on the cold, iron heater stove with a wooden bung-starter for order in the court. Tom Botts forgot he was guarding Steve and waded in to settle the row.

Duke Glore came spinning from the mixup with a bloody head which the chief had cracked.

Rising to his knees, Duke cleared his six-gun, slanted the barrel, as the chiefs' battling figure was suddenly thrust into the open.

Steve quit his seat on the counter in one long dive. He lit on Duke's braced shoulders, slapped down the gun barrel as the Twin Seven foreman thumbed the hammer. The bullet, intended for Striking Eagle, bored into the oil-stained floor.

Steve crooked his arm under Duke's chin, jerked back the foreman's head, reached out with his right, and

wrenched the smoking gun from his hand.

Striking Eagle, war club lost, darted out the front door to where a half dozen of his young men were waiting. The shrill war whoop of the Red Rock band resounded, then the drumming of hoofs as the shaggy war ponies scudded down the main street.

Botts was rushing toward the door, throwing a shell into his rifle barrel when he ran unexpectedly into the foot that Steve had thrust out. Tom pitched over, rifle exploding and bullet creasing the fat right calf of the store-keeper. The man yelped like a maniac, seized the chief's war club which lay on the floor, and belted Tom a glancing blow on the angle of the jaw that stretched the old acting sheriff on the ground.

Steve Knight, who had momentarily replaced his easy grin with a fighting snarl as he dived for Duke Glore, managed now to block two or three eager citizens rushing toward the front to get a pot shot at the fleeing Indians. They fell over Tom, and in the snarling, cursing struggle, Steve went down as if by accident. Deftly, he put another man to sleep with a blow of Duke's gun barrel.

The barber was now standing up on the counter, flourishing a sawed-off shotgun which had been handed to him by Redwin. The latter had not quit his office space to take part in the battle, nor had he lost his derby hat in the excitement.

"If you don't all stand up!" shouted the barber, "I'll throw two barrels of buckshot—*promiscuous*—"

None cared for buckshot in this confined space. They arose. Steve was the last. And with shirt torn off his body, and a right eye that was swelling rapidly, he did not appear the sort of clever fighter who had started this battle.

Duke Glore, flat on his back, half strangled because of the fierce clutch of Steve's arm under his chin, didn't revive until Buck Graun arrived from the Mountain Lion with pain relief in the shape of a demijohn of Valley Tan. This also succoured the prune clerk with the bullet welt across his leg, and everybody else in the place including the sheriff and the prisoner.

Glore raged that Steve had prevented him from putting a bullet through the chief. But Steve, as readily, pointed out that he had saved Glore thereby from a murder or mayhem charge. The Indian was a federal ward, and his death would have brought U. S. marshals swooping into town with warrants for the Twin Seven boss and his fighting friends.

"I'm no headstrong fighter," Steve alleged with his frank smile, "in fact, fightin' makes me plumb tired. My hoss, Charley, is always pointin' out—"

"To hell with Charley," rasped Glore. "If you'd forget that hoss and spend time huntin' the man who brained yore dad, you'd have more friends in this county."

HURRIEDLY the barber closed the case, put Steve under a bond of a thousand dollars. Tom Bott, a flour sack bandage around his head, growled as he drew handcuffs from his pocket. "Come on to jail."

None there believed Steve could dig up so much money. He didn't believe it either. But he didn't fear jail. He could stay there if the play ran that way, or kick his way out, for so far the jail had held nothing but drunks. Rustlers, killers, and horse thieves had been promptly hung until Sime Redwin started his law enforcement committee. Steve would have the honor of being the first man charged with felony to occupy the place.

All were amazed therefore when Simeon Redwin stalked from his office, pulled a wallet from his pocket, and counted out a thousand dollars to the barber. For this he asked a receipt.

When he received it, men understood why Sime always wore a hard derby hat. He removed the lid and put the receipt inside. It was Sime's idea of a frontier brief-case.

"A shot through that," said an admiring puncher, "might cancel a couple thousand dollars wuth of notes and mortgages."

This generosity of the grim man who considered him a fool and wastrel so startled Steve that he too forgot to grin. But Redwin quickly explained his action.

"I have no respect for that young man," he stated, "but for years I did business with his respected father. For that reason I do not wish to see a Knight in jail. I am hopeful he will not run away until he is cleared of this cattle and horse stealing charge, and that he will also aid the law in capturing the fugitive, Doc Battle."

Steve nodded. "Mister Redwin, I shore thank you. I won't run away. I like Caribou too well. And how could I run away without my hoss, Charley? Since that miscreant of a Doc took him, I'm plumb afoot."

Redwin spun around, glared through his glasses. "Don't attempt to rattle me," he said, "with your loose talk about horses and this thief holding you up. You furnished that horse to Battle for his escape after he had been caught red-handed, stealing cattle from another of your father's friends, Judge Ramsay, our next sheriff."

Steve gulped, lowered his eyes, would not answer this harsh charge, although a dozen of his former cow-punching friends who knew that once he had carried a punch and could swing a gun, waited vainly for him to show resentment. Disgustedly, they trailed their spurs from the store, muttering that the Knight blood had certainly turned milk-white. Now Steve was classed not only as a fool but also as a coward.

Only the limping merchant remained in the store, weeping over a smashed case which had contained four dozen hen eggs. He declared they were almost worth their weight in gold in Caribou. Besides the eggs in the scrambled mess on the floor, there were bursted flour sacks, broken catsup bottles, bolts of red calico, a keg of ten-penny nails, two broken boxes which had contained gingersnaps and soda crackers, and a half dozen jugs of apple cider vinegar. Finally, the merchant departed to get swampers to clean out the place.

NOW only the sheriff, Duke Glore, and Redwin remained to face Steve. And growling that Steve was his own master so long as the justice held the thousand in cash, Tom wobbled out the front door to seek more pain killer in the Mountain Lion.

Duke Glore glared into Steve's innocent eyes. He croaked because his throat was sore: "I'll never have a better show to kill you," and dragged out his gun.

Redwin struck it down, said sharply: "Law and order rules in Caribou. Get out—"

Duke obeyed, which seemed strange to Steve. But he forgot that when Redwin drew a folded paper from his derby hat. He carefully spread it out on the counter.

"Here is something," Redwin explained, "that you should know. Your father went heavily into debt while you were away. I did not wish to press him for payments when he was short and losing cattle in an early winter. But he was an honorable man. He insisted on giving to me a mortgage on the Cross Seven ranch, and a note for $30,000 which it secured. This was for debts he owed me."

Amazed, heavy of heart, Steve studied the printed form of the mortgage. He saw the familiar signature of his father. Then his eyes passed

over the six months' promissory note.

"He signed these papers," said Redwin, "shortly before his death. On November 30th of last year to be exact. He called me to the ranch and we ate lunch together. I did not wish the mortgage but he insisted. Now," Redwin glared at Steve, "that he is dead, I feel that I am entitled to a just settlement of this debt. If you had manifested a lively interest in ranch affairs, in running down the killers after your return, I might have shown some mercy. But you have been an outstanding example of worthlessness, a grinning horse-playing rascal. You don't even have a clear title to the Cross K because your enraged father threw away his will after you broke with him over your rustler friends and fled. That is—if he ever had written one. So—as this is the second of June—I am clearly within my rights if I press the foreclosure of this mortgage. This I intend to do immediately."

"It's strange," drawled Steve, trying with difficulty to maintain a game smile, "that you'd risk a thousand bucks on me for bail."

"That's different," Redwin snapped, heading for the door, "I would spend ten times that to save the son of an old friend—even a boxheaded fool like you—from the penitentiary. But I would not trust such a fool in a business deal."

He stooped, picked up the war club which lay on the floor where it had been dropped by the prune clerk.

"Such a club as this," said Redwin, with a wry grin, "could easily enough have killed your father. This may be the very weapon. He was fond of the Indians. Moccasin tracks were found the morning after his death on the porch of the ranch-house. It is my opinion that Striking Eagle and his braves have deluded you as they did your father. They killed him to prevent him from discovering they were eating his beef. They then baffled you by swearing they were his firm friends and yours, and would not have turned such a trick."

Steve nodded gloomily. "I wish," he said humbly, "I had as much brains as you, Mister Redwin. The gray matter you pack under that derby hat is shore immense. I'm sorry yo're goin' to take the ranch. But if you must, then I'll—" he sighed, "mount Charly Hoss and go back to Texas."

Redwin stood staring for a long moment, eyes hidden behind his flashing spectacles. In his right hand he clutched the war club. Steve faced him with a temporizing grin, a slack-jawed grin.

"Bah!" rasped Redwin, cramming down on his shock of iron gray hair, the derby laden with notes and mortgages. "Bah, it seems impossible that Captain Knight could have produced a son so—so—" Redwin fought for words, "so—brainless," he concluded, and stamped out the door.

Steve Knight was staring at a last years' calendar which the merchant had forgotten to remove from the wall when that worthy returned with help to clean up the store. Prominent in the party strode Stumpy Smith, a mop over his shoulder, a glint in his bright blue eyes.

Wrathfully he stared at his partner.

"Damn you," he snarled, "I got a mind to shoot you."

"What for?"

"Involvin' me, an honest man, in a rustlin' plot. We been friends for years. But it's all off now between you and Doc Battle and myself. I've split our bedroll three ways for keeps."

"But Stumpy—"

The little man said doggedly, "Get out while I'm holding' my temper."

And while the merchant and his cohorts watched with grins, Steve walked sorrowfully from the store, hearing as he went, the slap of broad and congratulatory hands against Stumpy's stout back.

"That's the way to treat a rat," declared the merchant. "Boy—you shore showed the right spirit, the kind us law and order gents want in Caribou."

CHAPTER V
Ambush!

WORD of the scorn shown Steve by his friend swept the town like wild-fire. It had a curious result. It split Caribou into two camps. When Steve strolled up the plank walk just before dusk, there were men of the Redwin following, those who heartily favored law and order, who passed him with scornful eyes. But arrayed against these were the adventurers and rangemen who admired deft work with a long rope, the saloon men who didn't like the closing laws, the gamblers who resented interference with crooked games.

So Steve was frozen on one cheek and warmed on the other as he sauntered through the town. He took it all in, frowns and smiles alike, with his usual genial front. But he hadn't quite expected such a result. It seriously interfered with his plan of campaign. The time was rapidly approaching, he hoped, when he could show Caribou that behind the smiling mask, the horse talk, there had for all these months been a determined man, a son intent on avenging his father, acting the fool because he had known from the time he first looked over the ground and evidence that he was arrayed against crafty cruel plotters who would have savagely fought a wise man but who had gradually come to disdain a fool, and therefore had become careless in their strength. He smiled wryly.

"But hell," Steve murmured, turning the end of the street, facing toward the west where the first stars were shining above the Black Thunder country, "I didn't aim to become the idol of every tinhorn crook in the county."

His gaze turned toward Signal Point that loomed above his old home, and there he saw a red light that he first took for a planet. But as it waxed and waned, he knew he was wrong. For some strange reason, the Indians had again lit the ancient war beacon on their favored lookout point. From all parts of the broad reservation, old warriors and young braves would come riding in their paint to the assembly place which Steve knew was just north of the broad fertile flat west of Knight's Crossing, the flat where Judge Ramsay, Glore, and a dozen punchers had jumped Doc Battle.

"Mebbe," Steve muttered, "ol' Eagle's so mad at the way they treated him at my trial, he's comin' down to wipe out the town."

He laughed then knowing the band would have small chance of raiding a hardy settlement like Caribou where every man packed a gun, a dirk, or a derringer when they went forth in the evening air.

Steve turned down the opposite side of the street, glad now that the swift dusk hid him from the eyes of friends and foes alike. It wasn't nice to be turned down by former friends in his own hometown. It required more nerve to stand up to that than to step into a blazing gun battle.

"I swear," growled Steve, "my jaw muscles are plumb wore out from grinnin'."

He wondered as to Doc but knew the old rider was tough, that his wound was a painful but not serious one in the flesh of his upper right arm. He felt certain Doc had crawled out of the hay after the departure of Steve and his captors from the ranch, relieved his hurts with remedies in the ranch-house, that now he was scouting nearby, even in town, slipping around like an old dog coyote with his nose to the ground.

HOOFS thudded on the hardpan as a knot of riders passed Steve, slowly walking their horses. He watched as a flash of light a few yards down the street outlined them. They were Judge Ramsay, Duke Glore, and Mary Lou.

Steve's first impulse was to hail them. Then he stepped back into the shadows. Action such as that would only arouse suspicion against the game girl who had aided two men, apparently looters of her father's herds, aided them because when it came to the acid test, Mary Lou would not believe that Steve nor his friends were cowards and rustlers.

"When this thing's settled," Steve said softly, watching the party drift their horses up to the Chicago store rack, "there'll be a real settlement with Mary Lou. That is—if she'll wear the best diamond ring a broken-down cowpunch can buy."

He strolled on down the street, heading for the Mountain Lion to pick up town gossip. About this time, men gathered for the appetizer drinks before they ate their suppers.

From the mouth of a black alley between the Gem Cafe and the Chinese laundry, a shotgun roared. The red blaze lit up the gloom. Buckshot whizzed over the head of Steve as he flung his lean body flat on the plank walk. All that had saved him from stopping eighteen buckshot with his head was a drop-off in the walk, a low spot where the Chinaman had built a wooden culvert to drain off his laundry water. The assassin had forgotten that low spot and held too high.

Alarmed by the roar, the town came on the high run. Steve, flat on his stomach, ripped his gun from under his vest—for he was carrying a short-barrelled Colt in an armpit harness—and threw three fast bullets into the mouth of the alley.

He heard a thud of boots, jumped up to follow, but his left arm swung numbly at his side and the world whirled about him. He slumped to his knees as the first of the crowd came up. These arrivals were Flo, the little blond waitress from the Gem, her small brother, and the fat, fry cook.

Steve grinned faintly, attempted to stand as the cook flashed a lantern. With a choked cry, Flo ran toward him, flung her white arms around Steve, buried his head on her breast.

"If they've killed you," she panted, "I'll see that they hang. This dirty town—turnin' down a man like you. Tryin' to ambush you."

And aided by her brother, Little Luck, Flo helped Steve into the Gem where she cut off his left sleeve and smeared bacon grease over the small blue hole on the point of his left shoulder where a low buckshot had skinned his firm flesh. It was the shock of that slight wound—for slight wounds are usually far more painful than mortal hurts—that had made Steve reel. Now, he sat on a chair, long legs outstretched, a hot cup of coffee in his right hand.

"I'm all right," he told Flo. "Soon as the numbness wears off—I'll feel like a hundred dollars. But my left wing will be sore a day or so. And dang it all, Flo, this is the second shirt I've had ruined today. They tore the fust one off'n me. If my hoss, Charley, know about that—"

Faces were pressed to the front window. Flo stormed to the front, angrily slammed and locked the door.

"The coyotes!" she cried. "Steve—they come near killin' you! I'm certain it was the same bunch that knocked off yore dad. Steve—" there were tears in her eyes and she laid her work-roughened hands on his shoulders, "Steve, you've got to quit foolin' around with that Charley Hoss You've got to quit bein' so happy-go-lucky. You must go out with a gun and smoke up that gang."

She was sobbing, and her lithe body swayed. Steve reached out, put his

good right arm around her small waist. After all, they were old friends, and Flo had cut many a slice of good apple pie.

"Charley Hoss told me today," he whispered into her pink ear as she rested against his breast, "that the showdown's about due. Luck's beginnin' to run our way. Ever since I give him that party—"

As he held Flo in his arms, Steve's eyes were toward the big front window. He saw a movement in the crowd, heard a laugh outside. Then the grinning face of Duke Glore appeared. Beside him stood a tall girl with dark hair and eyes, a girl in trim leather riding garments. For a long, long moment, she stood there looking in at the amazed and speechless Steve, at the blond girl he was embracing.

Then, with a lift of her chin, a swift veiling of her dark eyes, Mary Lou reached for the ready arm of Duke Glore, disappeared into the crowd.

Steve wasn't smiling when Tom Botts rapped on the door and was admitted by Flo. Tom growled that he had searched the alley without finding a trace of the killers.

Redwin, arriving with several other members of the law and order committee, declared they would search the town from pillar to post. Steve Knight might be out on bail, and heartily disliked, but he would receive all the protection honest men could give him.

Flo couldn't understand Steve's unusual gloom, the absence of his smile, after the committee had adjourned. He finished his hot coffee and followed them after briefly patting Little Luck's curly hair as a good-bye. It was the small boy who explained to the girl that a pretty lady had peered in the window while Flo was coaxing Steve to load his gun and go to war—the pretty lady who dressed like a real cowboy.

"That stiff-necked Ramsay thing," sniffed Flo. Her eyes became speculative. She put the tip of a finger between her white teeth. "Steve's a fine man." She looked in the mirror, tossed her curls. "Why not," she went on. "Duke's tired of me. This'll be his chance to grab off Mary Lou. And I hope," Flo spoke viciously, "she gets him. She'd deserve it for turnin' down a man like Steve on such slight suspicion. Just an arm around my waist." Flo laughed. "Good Lord, I've had a hundred around that waist. All in fun. But Steve—" Her heart warmed as she recalled how he had saved her in the Mountain Lion from brutal insult.

MEANWHILE Steve grumpily entered the Mountain Lion. When he walked to the bar, the man on his left invited him to take a drink. The customer on his right sneered to another friend that it was a great misfortune the camp possessed such poor marksmen.

Steve turned white with anger, whirled on his boot. The jeerer, one of Glore's cronies reached for a gun, waited, barked out "Well—am I keyrect?"

Steve remembered in the nick of time. A departure from his false role here before a hundred wise eyes might bring all his careful plans to ruin. The eyes of his father's secret killer might even be watching his answer to the Glore henchman's insult.

"Bony," drawled Steve, "I reckon yo're always keyrect." And turning easily to the intent barkeep, he asked for and received a bottle. He carried this up the stairs to a booth in the balcony while every man in the place watched. They watched until Steve drew shut the curtains.

"Set for a big drunk," Bony laughed to his friend, his lean brown face wrinkled into lines of deep disgust. "Duke told me to try him out if he come in here. See if he had got hog-

wild since his sweetheart saw him huggin' Flo. But he'll never go wild. He's about as harmless as ol' Sing Hi, the Chinee washerman."

His wiser friend cautioned Bony. "Sing Hi ain't so harmless. Once he lost his temper and chased me out of his place with a cleaver when I cussed him out for rippin' my best Sunday shirt up the back. Steve might turn same as the ol' Chink. Take it easy, Bony. You an' Duke."

But Bony grinned and bought drinks for the house from a roll of bills that not long before had reposed in Duke Glore's pocket. Then, pushing back his tall hat, he stroked his rat-tail mustache, reflecting, as he drank, that he had always been a better shot with a six-gun than with rifle or shotgun.

"To the next time," he toasted, raising his glass.

"What next time?" asked his friend.

"To the next time," Bony drawled, "that I can laugh in a fool's face and make him like it."

CHAPTER VI
Stampede!

IT wasn't the first time Steve had taken a bottle to the booth on the balcony. In this manner he had built up a reputation in Caribou as a wastrel and hard drinker.

Closing the curtain on any inquisitive eyes, he sat down at the table, uncorked the bottle, then carefully poured a quantity into his right boot. It wasn't a waste of liquor, but as there were no outside windows in the booth, and dumping it into any receptacle in the room would have been a giveaway to smart men, Steve was forced to this resort.

When Buck Graun peered into the booth, a quarter hour later, he saw Steve slouched over the table, boozily singing another of his famed "Buffalo Days" verses.

"Oh, Black Hills Gold showed in the pan,
Sweet corn and beans come in a can
An' red blood in the veins of man.
Deadwood Dick, tinhorns slick,
An' the poker chips went clickety-click."

"How's zat?" Steve inquired cocking a bleary eye. Then he held up the bottle. "Have one with me. Me an' my hoss—"

Buck grunted, blew a smoke ring, said testily, and with a reluctant admiration, "You can drink my red-eye faster than any man in Caribou. Most of 'em would be deader'n door nails if they had put away that much of a quart in fifteen minutes. But you—still able to put out what you call singin'. No—I won't have a drink. I know that stuff yo're downin'. Shucks, I sell it. So long."

There was reason behind Steve's apparent madness in wasting liquor that sold high in Caribou. He dumped it in his boot leg because thus he could carry the reserve away from the Mountain Lion. For months, he had been haunting the place which was a headquarters for range gossip and meetings. Here his two friends, Stumpy and Doc Battle, could make reports without great trouble. Down the dark hall was a small room in which Buck Graun held very private sessions which were assumed to be poker play for big money. But Steve, noting the friendship between Duke Glore and Buck, had for many weeks assumed that the two were hand in glove in crooked work on the range. And because he suspected that crooked range work lay back of his father's murder, he had therefore adopted this public role of a solitary toper. But if a saloon swamper had discovered wasted whiskey in the big brass cuspidor in the booth, Steve would have been exposed as a faker. Hence the bootlegging plan.

Always, he had been cautious about the apparent lowering of the bottle level for he had noted that previous

to a private meeting, Buck Graun usually inspected the adjacent booths. Buck, from a vast experience, would have known that no man could drink half a bottle of his rotgut in a quarter of an hour and live to talk about it.

QUARTER of an hour later, Steve dumped a little more red-eye down his leg. The stuff burned like fire. He also doused some on his shirt front and found too that it served as a good antiseptic for the buckshot wound in his left shoulder.

His next act for the benefit of Buck Graun threatened to become a killing. When the Mountain Lion owner parted the curtains, Steve's head was in his arms and he was snoring lustily. It required a vast control of nerves and muscles to maintain that drunkard's pose when he heard the growling voice of Duke Glore.

"Buck, here's a swell chance to throw a slug through that hombre's back. He's dead drunk. Never will know what hit him. We can pull his gun, fire a shot from his an' mine, then lay his beside him. When the crowd comes up, we can swear he was drunk, tried to kill me, and I beefed him in self-defense. The story would stick."

Buck remained silent so long that Steve tensed himself for quick action if the Mountain Lion owner decided Duke had the right idea. But Buck finally decided against the proposition.

"The chief," he said, "wouldn't okay that. We've worked smooth as frog hair from the jump. If we get excited and go to collectin' scalps just because we don't like certain parties, we're likely to knock down our meat-house. No—let the drunk sleep. He's harmless."

"He acts that way," Glore growled. "But lately, Buck, I've begun to have my doubts. It jest don't seem possible a hombre like Steve Knight would be such an out an' out idjit. There's things you don't know—"

"What?"

"Twice he could have killed me and he didn't."

Buck laughed. "Which proves all the more to me that he is a fool. If you were buckin' my game, Duke, like yo're buckin' his, I'd collect you a hull lot soon as I could do it. Fair or foul."

"Don't blame you. I would too. That shotgun tonight—"

Buck snarled. "Next time don't pay in advance. All you did was give Bony a free party. Come on. The chief's comin' up tonight for a little talk. By the outside entrance."

A rear stairway on the outside of the building gave access to Buck's guests. Citizens who did not wish to be seen entering the front door, thus were afforded plenty of privacy if they cared to risk their money on Buck's marked cards. And there were several who often tried it.

Duke stalked into the booth. Steve snored loudly. Duke seized the Cross K man's rather long hair, savagely jerked up Steve's head, stared into the half-closed eyes, the slack-jawed mouth, smelt the raw whiskey. He was convinced. He cursed and walked from the booth.

"Come on," he snapped. "I'm pretty tough but shootin' a specimen like that would be like puttin' a bullet into a poisoned dog."

Smarting from Duke's hair pulling, Steve lolled at the table, head pillowed in his arms. He vowed that soon he would pay Duke back for that cruel treatment. He also promised to give old Buck a break for the latter's talk that had saved him from Duke's gun.

WHILE he rested, with the noise of the busy bar beneath him, he summed up the case. Now he believed he could see daylight. He felt certain that the murder of his father had

been the start of a plot to seize the Cross K range, join it to homesteaded lands just across the river if the government threw open that tract for entry. It would be a huge domain.

But there also entered into the picture, the Twin Seven spread of old Judge Ramsay, which adjoined the Cross K on the east. That too should naturally be included to complete the grab of buffalo grass. There, Steve decided, was where Duke Glore had put in his work through the months of careful plotting, gaining the confidence of the judge by acts such as that of turning Twin Seven brands into the Cross K, and putting suspicion on Steve and his friends as rustlers.

The mortgage and note revealed by Redwin after the hearing had upset Steve's calculations, for the documents plainly showed his father's signature. He knew that in the past, Captain Knight had dealt with Redwin. No question would be raised in any court that considered Redwin's demand for a foreclosure. Steve would not have standing in a court to protest such action for, without a will, he could not be adjudged owner of the estate until the close of long and tedious court hearings.

But that wasn't the worst feature of this deadly plot which had overtaken a great outfit and struck down its founder. The worst had come when Mary Lou, looking through the Gem window, saw Steve apparently flirting with Flo. A proud girl of Mary Lou's type would not come begging for an explanation. She would wipe Steve Knight off her books. He'd rather lose his home ranch, even his chance of apprehending his father's murderers, than Mary Lou.

"Love," Steve whispered gloomily, "is just like that."

He was about to cast off his role of half-drunken fool and wastrel, forget watchful waiting on Buck's office down the hall, go in search of Mary Lou, explain to her what lay behind all that she had not understood. But as he gathered his boots under him, flinching as a pint of whiskey squashed around his toes, Stumpy Smith stuck his head through the curtains.

"Yo're hoss, Charley," Stumpy whispered, "is tied in the alley behind the Mountain Lion. Me an' Doc's got some business on."

He threw a forty-five cartridge on the floor, departed in haste, not daring to drop his pose of having parted in anger from Steve and Doc.

A bit of thin paper was rolled around the cartridge. Steve tore it off the shell, read a few words scrawled there.

"Injuns excited. Doc saw Strikin' Eagle. They hear U. S. has opened land across the river. Word should come in pronto."

Steve tore the note into ribbons, dropped it down his boot leg. When Caribou heard the Indian lands had been officially opened, there would ensue one of the greatest land races in the territory's history. For weeks, stampeders had kept their outfits up on the bits; stakes for marking locations; plats with section descriptions; guns to hold down their claim while friends rushed to the nearest land office to make filings. Such an office had been set up at Knight's Crossing, just below the Cross K south fence and across Black Thunder from the reservation.

Steve wondered just what business Stumpy and Doc were adventuring on. But there was no chance now to overtake the stocky puncher. He felt glad that his horse was in town, that old Doc was off the shelf and able to travel. Now he could hear a low mutter of talk through the thin walls of Buck's office.

Cautiously he slipped down the rather dark hallway, stood before the closed door. He couldn't make out the words of the conversation within until

he heard Buck's throaty bass raised in anger.

"Redwin can't crook us on the land. If he's got advance notice, he orter let us know right away."

"Shut up!" Duke Glore rapped out. "These walls are thin—"

"The door's thick enough—and locked—"

The door was suddenly jerked open. Steve sought to drop back from sight. Too late. Buck Graun stood regarding him, vastly amazed.

At the center table sat Duke Glore. Another man who lounged there was his crony, the black-mustached Bony. Behind them a half opened door led down the outside stairway into the alley.

"I thought," Buck began stupidly, "that you were drunk—"

Duke Glore kicked back his chair, went for his gun. Bony, half in liquor, sought to crawl under the table. Buck lunged forward, seeking to seize Steve, drag him into the room.

The Cross K man didn't grin. This opening of the door had of course put a spike in his whole plan of action. Now he must fight for life against three men. Duke's gun was already bearing as Steve evaded the grizzly bear thrust of Buck's huge right arm, half tore away his shirt reaching for the gun slung under his sore left arm in a spring harness.

Glore's first bullet, pitched high to buzz past Buck's head and strike Steve between the eyes, buried itself in the wall behind Steve as he broke at the knees.

Buck, overbalanced by his first rush, sprawled in the doorway on his fat legs. Bony, taking courage, jumped up from behind the table, threw his gun, and flashed a shot that cut the billowing slack of Steve's torn shirt which now hung around his waist like an apron.

Flinging his lean body sidelong to offer a narrow target, Steve pitched a bullet squarely into the cross on Bony. That man who had yearned a short time before to laugh in a fool's face and make him like it went under the table again—forever.

Duke Glore, seeing his partner fall, narrowed eyes on the hard set face of Steve Knight, lost his nerve. He sidled toward the outside door, pitched a wild bullet as Steve hurdled the sprawled form of Buck Graun.

Buck saved Steve's life. For as Duke fired his farewell bullet, a slug that would have cut through Steve's upper body, the Mountain Lion owner flung his arm around Steve's right leg and pulled him to the floor.

Duke crashed open the door, fled down the stairway, boots clattering.

Steve grunted. "Buck, I hate to do this. But I'm in a hurry," and tapped Buck to sleep with the front sight of his gun.

AS he arose, weak in the knees now, wondering that he lived after facing two guns, he heard a loud shout in the barroom. He rushed to the outside booth, threw aside the curtains, looked down.

Now the place was still as death. A hundred intent men stood listening to the news passed out by the merchant from the Chicago Store. The little man's legs shook as though he were chilled to the bone.

"Boys!" he piped, while his teeth chattered. "Two masked men busted into the store a while back. They said they was huntin' for Redwin's derby hat. Then they put me in the meat cooler. I dang near froze to death. Finally they let me out. They had busted open Redwin's safe with a crowbar and a sledge-hammer picked from my stock. They said they did that jest in case Redwin had forgot to put all his papers in his hat. They told—"

A man yelled. "We'll get them dirty holdups!"

The Chicago store owner shook his

head. "Boys—they did us a service. They found somethin' in the safe which shows Redwin pulled a dirty trick on this town he claimed to be so proud of. They found a telegram in code. It had come from some private source in the east, but Redwin had worked it into English right on the paper. It said—" and the prune clerk's teeth interrupted with a spasm of chattering.

"Dang it," roared a man, and Steve silently thanked him. "What *did* it say?"

"It said," the clerk piped, "that the U. S. will throw open for homesteadin', one minute after midnight, thirty square miles of the Red Rock Reservation—"

The Mountain Lion became an instant madhouse. Men went out the doors and windows, fought with fists, boots, even the barrels of guns when they jammed up. Steve Knight whirled, jumped over Buck Graun's limp form, scuttled down the outside stairs. He found his Charley Hoss waiting, tied in an empty shed a few feet from the rear door of the saloon.

As Steve swung up in the saddle, the first of the land stampeders to use the rear door and the alley, came popping forth like peas from a pod. Some excited puncher jerked a gun, smashed careless lead.

A high liner buzzed past Steve's right ear as he rounded the corner and headed away from town past the Mammoth corral.

CHAPTER VII
Blazes of Hell!

THE choicest locations on the Red Rock lay a good fifteen miles from Caribou. With the code wire from the east, Redwin would be the first man on the ground. Steve, galloping through the night, had no doubt that the man's friends would ride with him. He suspected that Duke Glore would be with the gang. He wished that Stumpy and Doc were siding him but he couldn't wait. He galloped northwest, Charley's hoofs sounding like drums on the hard-packed trail.

By starlight, he splashed through the shallows at Knight's Crossing below the Cross K, swung straight north toward Signal Point. The Indian beacon still burned there, a vast red glare in the darkness.

But now, the early pink of dawn began to break along the eastern divides. This huge flat across which Steve spurred the weary sorrel offered an unobstructed view in daylight. But Steve groaned. He would but see the stakes of Redwin and his men gleaming there where copper streaks showed below Signal Point, see their fluttering location papers pinned to other stakes lower down from the hills.

Redwin had plotted well. He would seize a vast tract today of U. S. land, consolidate it with the Knight holdings east of Black Thunder River, and under the law, there would be no redress. Steve, roaring ahead, confessed that he had nothing against Redwin except suspicion, nothing that would hold in a court of law.

As he topped the first low hill below Signal Point, the day broke over Wyoming. A red day with banks of clouds the color of blood reflecting the blaze of the June sun still below the horizon.

Steve saw horsemen far ahead, small and black as ants. He whirled his horse, looked south toward the river. His jaw gaped, for he saw the advance guard of the Caribou land stampeders just fording the river. Knight's Crossing was black with swimming horses, for these first landseekers were riders. But in the dusty distance rolled buckboards, four-horse teams, all coming full tilt.

Even as Steve watched in amazement, these riders checked their horses and rolled from saddles, began

to race down section lines, setting their stakes. Then dust puffed up like bullets hitting dirt as men remounted and headed back to register with the agent in the Knight's Crossing office.

Steve wasn't concerned with that land. He wished the homesteaders the best of luck. Hay and grain would be raised there for winter stock feed. He was intent on seeking, if possible, to save some range for the Cross K ranch, save it from the predatory man who had taken foul advantage of his hometown by withholding news of the opening.

Dipping over the ridge, Steve overtook two riders. He knew then that he had pushed his Charley Hoss to the ultimate limit for he saw that he had come up with Duke Glore and Mary Lou.

Glore whirled his pony, jerked a rifle from his saddle scabbard. As Steve came ahead, spurs flashing from withers to flanks, Glore pumped a shell into the rifle and flung the weapon to his shoulder.

Mary Lou, face white as death, rode in, slashed with her quirt, knocked down the gun. The bullet whined across Steve's front at a sharp angle. He heard its vicious twang as it glanced off a rock. Then Steve reached Glore, locked stirrups with the man, but never laid hand on the gun which he had transferred to his belt holster.

Glore gripped his carbine, breast-high, blazing eyes on his tall enemy. But Mary Lou drove her horse between the two men.

"Go on," she cried to Steve. "Go on. There's nothing here for you."

At that, Duke Glore grinned, lowered his gun, echoed:

"Nothing for you."

Steve cried brokenly. "Mary Lou—what you saw last night—"

"It's nothing to me what you do. I've ridden out here with the man I intend to marry. Ridden out to pick a piece of land for our future home. Good-bye—"

But Steve wouldn't play the fool now. That was all past. He was a man from his whisky-soaked socks to the top of his head. He sat four-square on his lathered Charley Horse. This was his woman. And there—there by God—there was his enemy.

"I'll put a bullet through you, Mary Lou," said Steve Knight, Stormy Steve now. "I'll put one through you and the next through my own head before I'll let you throw yoreself away on that yaller wolf."

"He's holdin' a gun on you—"

"Damn his gun! The dry gulchin' killer! It's him that brained my father, stole my girl! Damn his gun—"

Glore cried. "It wasn't me who killed yore father."

"You framed me for cattle rustlin'. I don't care about that. But you can't steal my girl." He slashed his spurs deep into Charley Hoss, drove the weary mount ahead so abruptly that he forced the sobbing, protesting girl aside. Glore tried to whirl his rifle. Steve swooped from his saddle, grasped the short barrel with his right hand, tore it away from Glore. He tilted it upward as he did so. Glore pulled off a shot. The bullet blazed past Steve's head. But so fiercely had he engaged Duke that the latter was half thrown from his horse.

Then Steve reached for his holstered six-gun. His dark eyes were like the blazing pits of Hell. He was a killer because he believed that this beaten man who swung helpless from his snorting, dancing pony was the killer of his father, the betrayer of his sweetheart.

But Mary Lou, plying her quirt down the flanks of her pony, drove in, knocked down Steve's gun, saved Glore from death. The foreman struggled to regain his seat. His horse, restless and on the verge of pitching, was thrown into a wild fit of terror when crashing gunfire broke out in the gulch that ran east and west along the foot of the mountains.

A hard-running horse came tearing over the crest. In the saddle sat a man with a derby hat crammed down on his head. Not fifty yards in his rear, half hidden in the dust, rode a half dozen Indians wearing full paint and feathers with old Striking Eagle leading the race.

Glore's startled pony lowered its head, humped its back, and threw Duke the length of the bridle reins. As the Twin Seven foreman hit the ground, he bounced once, then lay limp and out of the fight.

STEVE KNIGHT seized the reins of Mary Lou's horse before it could stampede. He dashed out of bullet line because the reckless Indians were pumping volleys of lead at the fleeing Redwin.

A bullet from the old chief's ancient musket knocked down Redwin's horse. The pony dug its spotted nose into the gumbo, rolled head over heels for a dozen yards. Redwin was thrown clear. But for the first time in the recollection of Caribou men, his derby hat came off his head.

But Redwin, valiant as a rat in a corner, jumped up on his skinny legs, raked a long six-gun from beneath his coat and smashed a bullet toward old Striking Eagle as the chief rode in full tilt to make a kill.

For the first time, Steve Knight saw that the old warrior wore the shield which had for years hung on the walls of the Cross K ranch-house. When Redwin fired, his bullet struck this tough round of bullhide, tore through, struck the chief, He rolled off his horse as though he had ridden into a granite rock. He lay on the prairie with his war bonnet trailing in the dust, his shield still on his lean, corded left arm.

When his braves raced up to take the gray hair of Sime Redwin, they looked into the drawn gun of Steve Knight.

"Friends," he said, "look after your chief. I'm takin' this man for myself."

Redwin stood up, gray to lips, but croaking protests that these Indians had unjustly attacked him as he was staking out homestead locations, that he must now ride for Knight's Crossing to make his filing.

Steve said grimly: "You won't feel so chipper, Redwin, when you run into the rest of the Caribou boys down on the river. They know now how you crooked 'em by gettin' word ahead and slippin' to the reservation hours before the word was out."

Redwin gasped. "How—how did you know that?"

"Somebody," said Steve, "searched your office. They was lookin' for yore hat. They failed to find it. But to be on the safe side, they busted open yore safe. They found the code telegram there. Passed out the word—"

Redwin clenched his fists. "If I can find those men, I'll jail them for breaking and entering, burglary, first-degree robbery—"

A voice, soft as syrup, interrupted him. "Here's yore men, Redwin."

The Caribou boss turned from Steve, looked into the grinning faces of Stumpy and Doc who had jogged up from the gulch, never so much as showing a mussed hair.

"Beacuse you framed the Injuns," drawled Doc, "we let 'em do all the chasin'. I'm sorry Steve interfered."

Steve grinned. "Charley Hoss didn't like to see so much killin'. He'd rather watch the law hang Redwin."

NOW, from the south roared the first of the land seekers to reach this point. But the greater drama of this conflict between red men and white checked them. Soon the impromptu sagebrush court in which Sime Redwin fought for life was surrounded by a hundred silent, hard-eyed horsemen.

They heard Doc Battle drawl. "Me and Stumpy broke into the Redwin safe. We'll go to jail for it if the law

wants us. But here's what we found in addition to the code telegram. It's what made old Strikin' Eagle so mad."

And Doc flung on the hardpan, an Indian war maul with a dingy brown stain covering the stone head that Steve Knight knew was his father's blood.

With a curse, he took Redwin by the throat. Mary Lou, weeping, seized Steve's arms, prevented him from choking the man. Redwin, reeling back, whipped a thin long knife from beneath his coat, lunged toward Steve to drive the blade into his throat.

Stumpy Smith fired without missing a drag on the cigarette he had just lit. Redwin flattened out on the ground, body covering the weapon with which he had brained his friend.

Duke Glore, coming hazily to his senses, sat up, tried to bring a gun into play. Doc Battle, leaning lazily from his horse, said mockingly. "Hell—yo're jail bait. Not wuth killin'," and knocked Duke flat with a bullet through his gun arm.

Steve addressed the solemn ring of landseekers.

"Friends," he said, "if Striking Eagle were alive, he'd testify that Redwin must have forged the mortgage and note he claims to hold on my father's ranch. It is dated November 30th of last year. Friends, Striking Eagle told me that my father was with him all day in the mountains on the last day of the official hunting season. I checked up on the date after Redwin displayed the note and mortgage. He'd swore he had met my father at the ranch, ate lunch with him. That was a lie. For in this county, the last day of the hunting season came last year on November 30th. But I can't prove that now because the old chief has gone to the Happy Huntin' grounds. Sent there by Redwin's bullet."

A hoarse grunt interrupted. "Striking Eagle no dead, but got sore stummick. Bullet go through shield. But lose power. Still pack plenty punch though."

Two young braves led the aged warrior through the crowd to Steve. He seized the chief's hand, shook it so heartily that plenty of color came back into the wind-broken brave's face. Then the bullhide shield was examined, the bullet hole was stared at with many exclamations of wonder. Finally an old pioneer in the crowd spoke up.

"These reds," he said, "found out paper made dang solid packin' for their shields in the early days. Once I took a shield off a dead red on Powder River and took half a Bible out. It give me somethin' to read durin' the campaign. Us boys had a great time sortin' out the pages. We passed them around the fire at nights."

Striking Eagle grunted. "Yeah—me pack this with paper too. When I take it down to hunt man who killed my friend, I put more paper in it. Find some there too that ol' Captain put in. He want to help Injun, I guess."

Mary Lou, examining the shield, spoke quietly to Steve, but with an undertone of vast excitement. "This is the paper he means, Steve. Something your father tore up. Then—thinking better of it—he stuffed the fragments into the old shield. I can make out two or three lines."

Steve stared at the faded foolscap fragment she passed him. There was but one line in his father's firm writing. But it read.

"To my beloved son, I hereby leave all my pro—"

"It's the lost will," Steve said huskily. "It'll stand in court if we don't lose any of the pieces." And then there ensued a scuffle until all the portions had been recovered and fitted together like a jig saw puzzle. It was a simple will. It named Steve as his father's sole heir. The captain had torn it up when he broke with his son, then repented and taken time

out to think it over. He had stuffed the fragments behind the old shield. And he had been overtaken by murder before he could draw a new will.

BY late afternoon, Knight's Crossing had become a tent town of five thousand citizens. Thirty square miles had been staked out. Down on the river, eager homesteaders in some areas had already broken up the sagebrush with their plows. Farther north near Signal Point, Steve and his friends had driven their stakes, not to grab a hog's share of range but to widen the boundaries of the Cross K.

Steve was pointing out to Mary Lou an excellent location for a cabin by the river in which a honeymoon could be enjoyably spent when three riders came whipping over the hill. Stumpy yelled.

"Steve, look out!"

Steve whirled, dodged, just as Judge Leffingwell K. Ramsay threw a bullet toward him. Then Doc Battle crashed his horse into the old man's mount, and took away his gun.

"By the Eternal!" the judge raved. "You are not satisfied with eloping with my daughter, but you must beat me in a political election."

"Political election?" Steve questioned.

Flo, of the Gem, came riding up, a beaming smile on her face.

"What the judge means is that you were elected sheriff of Caribou," Flo chuckled. "When daybreak came, everybody had quit town to take up land. They forgot all about the election. The judge, it seems, had taken an overdose of stomach bitters, and he wasn't on hand to hold his votes. Well, Buck Graun looked me up. He said he was sore at the way Sime Redwin had double-crossed him. He said he must quit Caribou in a hurry before Steve Knight came back. But he swore Steve was the best man he knew for the law and order job. So between us, we turned out the vote for Steve. And we elected him. The final count was fifty to one. I don't know," Flo turned a roguish eye on the judge. "I don't know who cast that one vote for Judgie, but I got a pretty good idea."

Steve gasped out. "Flo—thanks—but you shouldn't have turned such a trick. Me, *sheriff of Caribou.*"

"It's your own hometown isn't it?" Flo snapped. "Well, I got a kid brother growin' up. Folks like me want men like you wearin' the star. You got more to think about now, Steve, than lallygaggin' around the girls."

Stumpy Smith rode up, bowed in his saddle, said: "Flo, you're a gentleman. Me an' Doc each took up a homestead. Take yore choice of either."

"Land or men?"

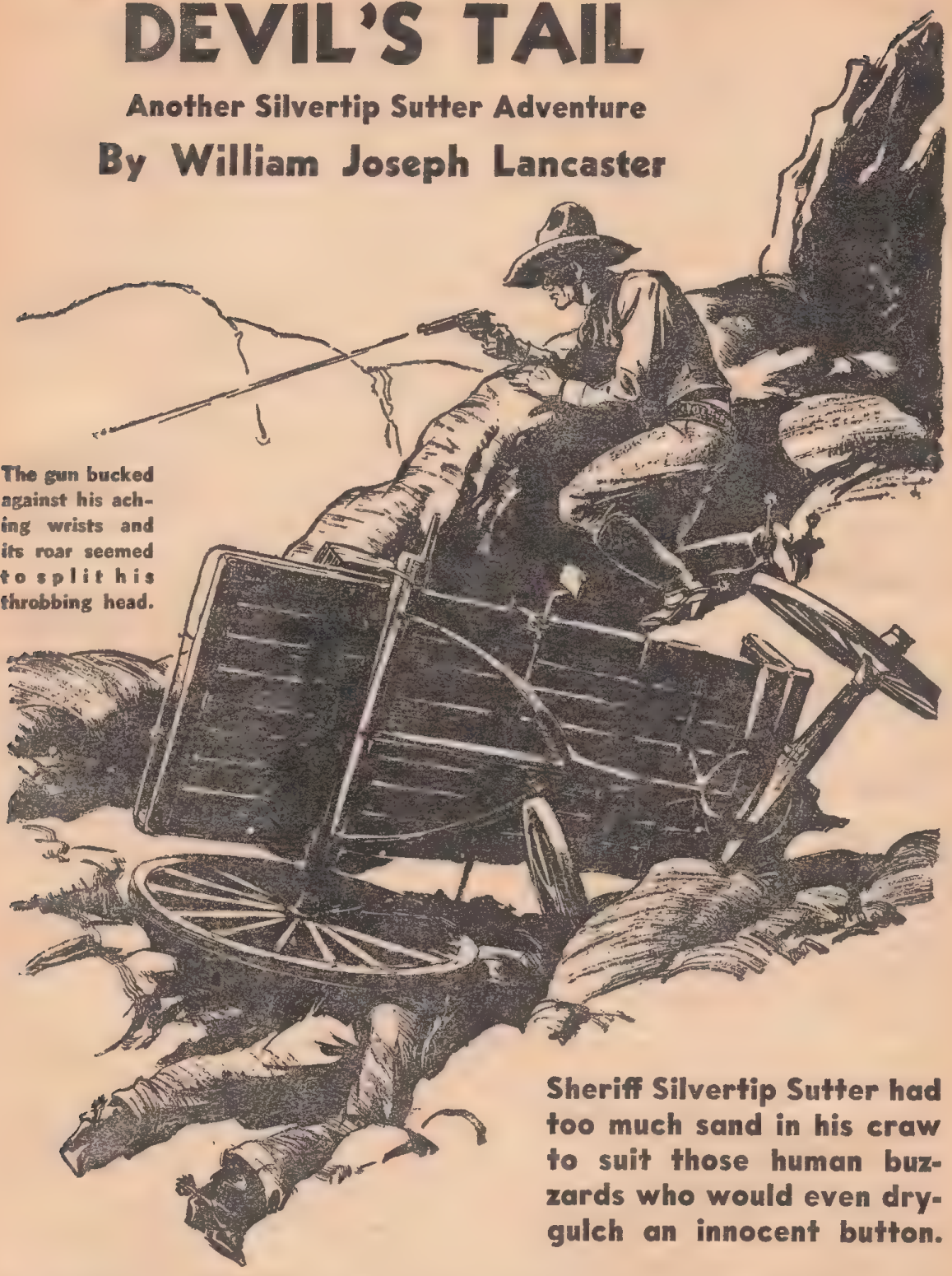
"Both," said Stumpy.

"Shucks," laughed Flo, "I'll think it over."

BUZZARDS OVER DEVIL'S TAIL

Another Silvertip Sutter Adventure

By William Joseph Lancaster



The gun bucked against his aching wrists and its roar seemed to split his throbbing head.

Sheriff Silvertip Sutter had too much sand in his craw to suit those human buzzards who would even dry-gulch an innocent button.

SHERIFF "SILVERTIP" JOE SUTTER brushed the blood out of his eyes so he could see his gun sights, then pressed the trigger. Whang—ang—ang, the walled-in basin double-echoed the report.

"That put the critter on his knees! Looks like he's bogged down for

good. But there were two of them. Now where'd that lanky hop-toad go to?"

For answer a bullet whined overhead. Silvertip ducked behind a fin of granite. A crease across his own head made him drowsy. He wanted to close his eyes and stay there, but a sharp pain in his leg kept him awake.

After a time he wiggled back into the shelter of a demolished buckboard that was up-ended in the rock-strewn basin. There was a young man there in the wreckage. Silvertip managed to pull him out; looked down at the unconscious form through eyes that were strangely out of focus.

"Hell—I ought'a know who he is, his face looks familiar," he thought. "But damn me if I can place him. I got'a get him out of this hot basin."

With the limp form across his shoulder, Silvertip found the task a tough one. It was all he could do to drag his feet along. "If I wasn't too danged sleepy—" he thought and tried to get his eyes open wider. They were odd, unmatched eyes. One was hazel while the other had a decided blue cast to it. Finally he got them open, then an astonished stare crept into them. He was gazing up at a ceiling—a white ceiling.

"Hells-bells! I'm in a room—in bed, bigosh! I been dreamin'!" he muttered. Yet somehow it had more substance to it than the stuff of which dreams are made. Slowly he turned his head. An open window came into his range of vision. Through it he made out a flagpole on a courthouse. And there, straight across the square, was a railroad station. He could see a blackboard with train schedules chalked on it. On the wall beside it was a poster.

He could make out the large black letters. REWARD. He knew the rest, for there had been one like it in Capricorn, Silvertip's own town. Closing his eyes he mentally repeated:

REWARD.

$500 for the capture, dead or alive, of two bandits that dynamited and robbed the H. & U. P. pay car and killed the paymaster.

"This must be Coopertown," he reasoned. "Now how in thunder did I come to be here? I set out after them hop-toads. The rest is mighty hazy."

A sound across the room whipped his head around. When the dizziness from this sudden move passed, he was looking at a pleasant-faced young man in another bed. The lad's head was bandaged, one arm lashed to a pine splint. He was bolstered up with pillows and there was a food tray across his lap. The young chap grinned. It was the face Silvertip had seen in his dream.

There was something tight across his own forehead. Reaching up he discovered he, too, was bandaged. More than that his leg, when he tried to move, was stiff and numb.

"Hello—Kid. They creased you too, did they? How come you was ridin' posse with me?"

"I wasn't riding with you. You were riding with me. Don't you remember? I came out here to homestead the little place over in Whipper Meadows. You said you'd show me the way."

SILVERTIP'S muddled brain began to clear. His short-cropped gray mustache lifted in a smile and a friendly light crept into his unmatched eyes. A light that invariably appeared when he talked with someone he liked.

"The fog's liftin' a might, Kid," he said. "If I remember right you got a span of flea-bitten cayuses and a buckboard?"

"You mean I did have," the young man answered disconsolately. "That was all I owned and I'd counted on it to help me move up on the little place my father left me. It'll take a

couple hundred dollars to replace that rig, so I'm sunk."

"Sure—I remember now. Them horses got scairt when we crossed the railroad tracks at the summit and started to run. You couldn't stop 'em and neither could I. We came barging down Devil's Tail road and went over the edge into the canyon."

"Yes—that's it. When I came to I was across your shoulder and you were staggering up the trail. We got to the road, then you collapsed—went out like a lamp. I could look down into that canyon and see the smashed buckboard and the dead horses. I was trying to find water to bring you to when two men came along with a wagon. They carted us here."

Silvertip made no reply. His thoughts were on the incident the boy had recited. There were facts connected with it that the lad did not fully comprehend. Silvertip redoubled his efforts to piece out the story.

Whang—ang—ang. Those echoing gunshots hung in his thoughts. Too vivid to be the figment of a dream. His struggle to concentrate was interrupted by the voice of the doctor. A nurse was coming into the room behind him.

"Well—well, mister, you're awake—eh?" said the corpulent medico. "You got plenty busted up, didn't you? I'll have another look at that head. What's your name?"

"Sutter—Joe Sutter. I'm sheriff of Benton County. I got'a get goin' at once. I'm on the trail of those train bandits. Just hand me my clothes."

The doctor glanced at the nurse and said, low voiced: "Out of his head yet. Take off those bandages, Miss Crane."

When she deftly removed them, the doctor's fingers traced a wound that Silvertip realized extended from a point over his eye to the edge of his gray hair where it fringed his neck. He waited until it was dressed and bandaged, then said: "Now I'll be lightin' out, doctor. Thanks for your help."

"You won't be leaving this bed for a week or more," was the stern answer. "You've a very bad leg. I'll look at that next, Miss Crane."

Silvertip saw then that the limb was bandaged just above his knee. It pained him greatly and he slid his hand down along the back side, aiding the nurse when she lifted his knee. That is how he chanced to find the lump there just at the edge of the bandage, so close to the surface that his fingers could trace its contour. In fact, the skin was broken at one point and Silvertip's thumb nail enlarged it. It was an easy matter to squeeze the object out into his hand.

It was a wonder the doctor had not noticed it, Silvertop thought. Probably he had been in a hurry with both patients. That was why he was making a second examination now. But Silvertip did not mention the little object he held snugly in his hand.

"Looks like a splinter of wood from that buckboard harpooned him," the doctor told the nurse. "Just missed the artery by a whisker. He's lucky."

"His fever is high," Miss Crane informed him when the leg was bandaged once more.

"That accounts for his being out of his head and thinking he's a lawman and rambling on about train robbers. Watch him close and keep him quiet. In a week he'll be able to tell who he is and get back to his spread."

SILVERTIP watched them march out of the room and he flung an oath after the fat medico. Then he turned to the lad again.

"What's your moniker, Kid?" he asked to relieved the fury that was making his head ache.

"Curtis. Bob Curtis. But I like the way you say—Kid. Suppose you call me that."

"Curtis," Silvertip repeated to him-

self. The name added another explicit item to the gradually clearing picture

"Old Jim Curtis' kid," he repeated. "That's why I was ridin' with him instead of headin' a posse like what I should'a been doin'. Still—if I had, I would'a been ridin' the Tobacco Range where it was thought them highway men was holed up." Suddenly he tossed the object he held in his hand over on the Kid's bed.

"What part of a buckboard did this splinter come from, Kid?" he asked wryly.

Curtis picked it up, threw an inquiring glance at Silvertip. "Why—this is a bullet—anybody would know that," he said.

"Yeah—and a doctor who'd been in these parts long would know the sort of hole bullets make too. He ain't even good on mental ailments or he wouldn't say I'm batty just because I claim to be a lawman."

"That's right," Curtis said seriously. "I seem to recall there was a star on your vest when I first talked to you. Can't you show it to them?"

Silvertip's eyes shifted to a chair where his clothes were carelessly thrown. His boots were on the floor along with his gun harness. His dust-streaked vest hung on the arm of the chair. But a strip of faded cloth was torn away where the star had been pinned for so many glorious years.

"Reckon it got ripped off in that tumble down the mountain side," he said bitterly and his unmatched eyes lifted and fixed once more on the REWARD notice across the station platform. His mouth set hard and his nails bored into the palms of his hands. Rebellion churned his blood until it pounded like thunder in his head wound.

"So they aim to hold me prisoner, do they?" he said in a mumbled tone the Kid did not catch. "When I should be forkin' a horse and tailin' after them two train bandits. Well—I'll show that medico a thing or two!"

He tried to sit up. Managed it after a try or two. This brought his head high enough so he could see there was a horse hitched to the rail just outside.

Not his horse, of course, but—the wild idea set his nerves atingle. Being a conscientious lawman, he battered down the thought. But there was a small voice within stubbornly arguing: "I could come back and explain. It wouldn't exactly be horse stealin'. What else is there left to do. They won't believe I'm sheriff. They'll hold me here even if they have to put me in a straitjacket. Well?"

He glanced at his clothes again. A train whistled far down the valley. There was an idea. When the train pulled in there would be a great deal of bustle and confusion and noise. That would be the time to move. Silvertip closed his eyes to better organize his action. Someone—the nurse probably—clicked heels down the corridor. Silvertip laid down, pulled the covers up to his chin. But the busy heels tapped on past the door and died out.

Bob Curtis moved, grunted, then went quietly to sleep. A cold nervous sweat formed on Silvertip's forehead. He swung his feet out on the floor, tried his weight on the bad leg. It pained like the devil. He laid back, gritting his teeth, stayed there longer than he thought, for unexpectedly there sounded the bell of the incoming train. Silvertip lurched out of bed, hopped across to the chair, pulled on his trousers, had one boot on, then he froze to the spot. There was someone at the door. The knob turned. The door was opening.

With frantic haste he reached the bed, slid in, yanked the covers up over him. And none too soon, for the nurse came in with a tray and set it on a small table, then turned toward the bed. But she stood there staring at the footboard. Cautiously, Silvertip let his eyes follow hers. A thin

oath filtered through his gray mustache. In his haste he had pulled the covers out at the foot. One high-heeled boot and a red woolen sock loomed grotesquely against the white sheets.

The astonished nurse let out a yell as she dashed for the door. "Doctor—Doctor—come quick! The man, the crazy one, is trying to escape! Doctor—Doctor!"

SILVERTIP had long since learned that any vital plan could well begin with action. Even as he kicked out of bed he heard the doctor's deep voice and the sound of running feet. Tossing the other boot out of the window and slinging his gun belt across his shoulder, Mexican fashion, he straddled the sill, got his toe on the foundation coping under the window. From there it was a three-foot drop to the ground. He took it with the doctor's hands reaching out for him.

But the doctor was too corpulent to climb out. He would have to run the length of the corridor. Silvertip yanked on the other boot. Headed for the hitch rail. Then he was brought up once more with a sickening sense of defeat. The horse was not there. The train was ready to pull out. The conductor was calling: "All aboard—all aboard."

Hopping along like a one-legged man, Silvertip dodged behind a freight wagon, then lurched forward in the shelter of hitched teams that lined the square. He reached the station platform just as the doctor's cry came from the porch. His voice had an uncomfortable carrying quality.

"Conductor—conductor—look out for a crazy man! He got away from us! Don't let him board your train!"

Silvertip had not thought of boarding the train. All he wanted was to get across the tracks before it pulled out. That would act as a barrier while he looked around for another horse. He managed it because the train came to a dead stop again. That was bad. Everything seemed to be against his escape. On top of that there was not a horse in sight.

Standing there, uncertain which way to go, crouched down behind the slatted cow catcher, he waited. Then a thought born of desperation came to him. He climbed up the dusty slats and stowed away on the flat-topped pilot. Prone against the cylinder-saddle in the shadow of the smoke box, he lay motionless. He was so dizzy he could not determine whether he had been seen or not. His leg pained so much that he scarcely cared.

Presently the train moved again. He heard the conductor assuring the doctor no one had boarded the train. Miss Crane was saying: "He must have turned toward the livery stable, doctor. He can't go far in his condition."

The train gained speed. The cool breeze in Silvertip's face was refreshing. Well—he had managed to get away. He was all set now. He began to formulate further plans, closing his aching eyes to do so. Suddenly he sucked in his breath.

"Hell's-bells!" he panted. "Here I am perched on a train that won't stop again until we reach Castle Falls. That's close to forty miles beyond the point I'm aimin' to reach."

He lay there suffering the tortures of hell with his bullet-riddled leg and a throbbing head that would not let him reason in an orderly manner. "I ain't gained a thing," he went on. "Except havin' the satisfaction of givin' that half-baked medico the slip. Crazy am I? Well, I'll drop in on him some time and rub his nose on my star. It'll be a new one, too, and not wore smooth like the one I lost."

But this did not help him now. The train twisted up toward the summit. The Devil's Tail road could be seen now and then and it quickened Silver-

tip's interest. He knew the tracks crossed the wagon road just beyond the Glades. That was where the Kid's team started to run.

He wanted to get off about there, but to jump in his present condition meant suicide. Sight of the hand rail curving down over the steam chest set him to planning anew. It led along the running board toward the cab window. Another wild plan pushed its way into his mind.

"Reckon I'm set to stage *some* lawless trick before I get out of this mess," he argued. "My try at horse stealin' got nipped in the bud. Maybe I'm better suited to train hold-ups. Well, I'll have a try at it."

Getting shakily to his feet he grabbed the hand rail, started on his way back toward the cab. The fireman was on the apron, stoking wood into the firebox. Gun in hand, Silvertip opened the narrow door and stepped inside. Face as white as a ghost's—blood staining his head bandage, he made a ghastly sight. The engineer, looking across the cab, started violently and his mouth moved several times before he finally shouted: "Look out, Frank! This is another train stick up! Looks like he's set on drilling us, too!"

"No—I ain't gunnin' you if you do what I say," Silvertip announced. "Bring her to a stop just after you enter the Glades. We're 'most there now."

The fireman closed the firebox door, then took his post at the cab window once more. Silvertip backed against the water tank where he could cover both men. He watched the familiar land spots as they whirled past. Presently he said:

"Here's the place, engineer. Shut her down. You can start soon's I'm off."

"Sure—and leave the express car so's your men can blow it open. But there ain't nothing we can do, Frank," the engineer said and brought the train to a grinding stop. Silvertip did not waste time or breath to tell him differently. Just climbed down the three iron steps, dropped to the ground. He motioned them to proceed. When the last car passed he sat down on the ties and struggled to regain sufficient strength to go on.

IF HE had much reconnoitering to do he knew he would not hold out. He favored his leg as much as possible. Blood ran in warm rivulets down into his boot. His head felt as though it was mountains high above his shoulders. But it was not in Silvertip's nature to stop or turn back.

Sight of three buzzards sailing in low circles and scolding over the right of discovery, put renewed strength into his spent muscles.

"Reckon I hit the spot mighty close. Them buzzards is countin' on havin' a horse flesh feed. Thought it was about here that me and the Kid took our plunge. Now if I can manage to get down there and pick up the trail."

He did not consider the slim chance he had of following a healthy bandit through this rugged country. There was no doubt about picking up sign. Silvertip was adept at that. After that it was a case of holding out and he did not like to dwell on that part of it.

He slid down a pine needled back onto the road, lay there a moment coughing dust out of his lungs. Then he crawled over and peered into the rock-strewn basin. There lay the buckboard and the two sun-bloated horses. But his attention immediately switched to a movement some distance up the other side of the walled-in basin.

Closer examination showed it to be a man piling rocks to form a rectangle and his task seemed about finished, for he cast a glance at the buzzards soaring above, then hurried back toward the basin floor. He was

lost in a clutter of big boulders for a moment. When he reappeared he had a lifeless form across his shoulders. He put his dead companion in the sepulcher he had fashioned and piled more stones on top. The burial completed, he came back some distance and again disappeared.

"Got the H. & U. P. payroll cached there in some small cave," Silvertip reasoned. "But he won't leave it there. I'll keep my eye on that spot." He slipped down another fifty feet to a snow bent pine where he could better watch. Sweat oozed out along his forehead, burning into his narrowed eyes. His bloodless lips moved.

"I knew that dream was real. Was certain I gunned one of them jackals until he broke at the knees. That other ranny is the one that creased me. Them runaway horses just naturally pitched us into this basin where they was aimin' to hide out. Now where'd that hop-toad go?"

He was soon to know because the bandit appeared presently. He had a pack on his back and carried a carbine in his hand. He crossed the basin floor and started his climb up the adjoining wall, stopping frequently to scan the timber line and listen.

"The loot's in that pack and the critter's headin' for that low saddle on the rim. If he makes it I've lost him for good," Silvertip reasoned, and instantly pushed forward to gain a vantage point. In a moment more he would have reached a ledge that formed a perfect fortress behind which to maneuver. But on the very edge of a deep crevice, a sharp pang in his leg caused him to stumble.

Grabbing for support he dislodged a stone. It went bounding down the cliff. The walled-in basin echoed the disturbance. The man with the carbine whirled around just in time to see Silvertip—in a precarious position—pitch headlong into a shallow depression from which it was suicide to retreat. A fin of granite, scarcely wider than the spread of his shoulders, offered the only protection. He flattened behind it.

The man with the carbine lost no time in directing a stream of lead against the tiny barricade. One—two—three—four—Silvertip counted the reports. The sixth shot was so well aimed that it burned a furrow along his shoulder blade. Warm blood trickled down under his arm. He had very little of it to spare. He gritted his teeth and grunted: "Seven—one more is all that carbine holds. Eight—now."

He raised his head. The outlaw was jerking cartridges from his belt, feeding them into the magazine as he backed toward the shelter of a cone-shaped rock. Silvertip's arm and shoulder lifted above the fin of rock. Hooking back the hammer with as much deliberation as though he were going to shoot at an inanimate target, he aligned the sights.

The gun bucked against his aching wrists. Its roar seemed to split his throbbing head, but his unmatched eyes never flinched and what he saw made him lick his parched lips with satisfaction. The lanky outlaw appeared to slip—falling to one knee. His back-load held him there, bending him lower and lower until finally it had him crushed flat on his face. Then it slipped sidewise, rolling him several feet down the slope.

Satisfied the awkward sprawl was not a ruse, Silvertip struggled to his feet, began his climb down the wall. When at last he stood looking down into the face of the bandit, he knew it was Smoke Ellis—outlaw killer who had spread terror over the entire state.

THE return trip from that hot basin was something he could never describe. It was the second time he had taken it in a sort of daze, not knowing what he was doing. This time, in place of the Kid, he carried

the H. & U. P. gold and the knees of his pants were torn to shreds where he had slipped or crawled.

The sound of a panting locomotive grinding up the grade made him open his eyes at last. He was collapsed on the edge of the Devil's Tail road and buzzards were sailing directly over his head.

"You needn't stick around here," he said faintly and found he could not move his injured leg. "I ain't countin' on givin' up yet. That train crew reported another holdup when they got to Castle Falls and likely that's a posse they aim to drop off in the Glades."

He had guessed it right. There were a score of them when they finally spilled down the bank to the road. They were armed to the teeth. Bill Walsh from the District Attorney's office was one of them, and another was a white-mustached man who turned out to be president of the road. It was Walsh who recognized Silvertip in spite of his condition.

"It's Sheriff Sutter," he exclaimed, and ran toward the sheriff. "There's your payroll, Tom. And since I don't see any bandits handcuffed together I take it Silvertip gunned them out. But they certainly cut him up some before he got them."

Silvertip nodded and wiped blood out of his eyes just as he had done there in the basin in the beginning. The president gripped Silvertip's limp hand. He said: "Well—there's that reward I offered and you'll get it as soon as I get back."

Silvertip shook his head, but his eyes were brighter than they had been. "A lawman can't take reward money," he explained. "But your promise stands just the same. There's a kid down in Coopertown that'll get it. He's the one that scairt them outlaws out of hidin'. And he lost a couple of horses and a right good buckboard doin' it. He don't realize what he done because he got jarred up considerable. Rocked to sleep in fact. They're patchin' him up down there and he'll be needin' that money to get another team."

They lifted Silvertip tenderly, carried him back to the train and made him as comfortable as his condition would allow. But there was no way of telling how he was suffering because there was a queer smile playing about his mouth and his white lips were mumbling: "Jim Curtis' kid. Good old Jim. He was a friend to me back there in the valley when we first came. I'll be seein' the kid through, I reckon. He's a dead ringer for his father and he's got grit, too."

"What was you saying, Silvertip?" Bill Walsh asked.

'Nothin', Bill. I was just complainin' about how damned mean I feel."

THE END

CHAPTER I
Dumb and Lucky

FOR three hours Shay had crouched in his blind, waiting for that pig-stealing eagle to come after the bait he had planted. But the eagle continued to soar in wide, effortless circles over Sentinel Gap.

Shay wasn't the biggest of the Shoto boys, but he was big enough to begin to feel decidedly cramped in that place. It seemed like an awful long time since breakfast and his belly was beginning to crawl and cramp a little. A big, twenty year old fellow,

LOBO LUCK

By NORRELL GREGORY

Luck is what you make of it—and what your guns or fists or plain he-man courage can take from life when luck's against you

Stilldust hit the top of the balcony railing, went through it as if it were paper, and plunged headfirst into the gaping, shouting crowd below.

still growing. He was *always* hungry.

Down the valley, at the forks of the river, he could see their set of buildings. He saw his two elder brothers, Sam and Sim, come in from the timber where they had been felling logs for the new barn. Pretty soon now his father and the other three brothers would be showing up. And Shay knew that if he quit and went to dinner that blasted eagle would come down and fly off with another pig. It seemed like there was an eagle up there for every pig they owned.

Just as Shay turned for another look at the eagle, he saw a group of horsemen break out of the Gap. This notch, where the Gap slashed through the solid rampart of the Lemhi range, was so narrow that it actually overhung the trail. So the eagle did not see these riders until they saw him, and Shay saw him drive his wings in a powerful down sweep to put more atmosphere between himself and these riders. The leading man's right arm swept skyward and the eagle suddenly turned completely over in the air, fell a little way, righted himself, only to turn over again. This time he did not right himself but dropped like a stone. Two reports, so close spaced they almost merged, came winging down the wind.

Shay came boiling out of his shelter dragging the old Winchester, his eyes a-gleam. He knew any shooter might hit the eagle once, with a lucky shot, but that it took more than luck to hit him twice.

"That's shootin'!" he exclaimed. "And with a short gun, too."

It was shooting, no question about it. The man who had fired the shots watched the eagle strike the trail almost in front of his horse's nose. The rider swung with a quick swoop of his body and picked the bird from the ground without dismounting. Then the party came surging on down the slope in close formation, leather creaking, spurs and bits rattling.

It was Fireman Turk and his men, returning from the long ride across the desert to Big Sink. Fireman Turk was a hard rider, a hard drinker and a hard fighter; he had been the first into the Little Egypt country after the Shotos.

He dropped the eagle at Shay's feet and pulled up his horse. A tall man by ordinary standards, but not by the Shotos'. His high-set shoulders made him look taller, as did his dark, narrow face. A mature man who had been over the road—a rough road, and it had left its mark on him. No doubt but that he had left *his* mark along that road, for there was a supreme confidence upon him.

"There's your eagle, boy," he said lightly. "Your pappy about the place?"

"If he ain't he soon will be," Shay said, his good-natured face showing none of the rage that was boiling within him. It always enraged him to be addressed in that fashion. Turk touched his horse with his already bloodstained spur and moved on. One of his men, a heavy, stocky fellow with a brutish face, let his arrogant look pass appraisingly over Shay's build. He said something to the little waspish fellow next to him and that rider looked at Shay quickly and laughed. He was quick as a mink in his movements, and his eyes were furtive. Shay didn't know either of their names, but he had already supplied names for them. The big one was Brutis, the little one Mink.

HE followed them towards the ranch, gripping the 45-70 Winchester with one hand, the eagle's legs with the other. Easily the best looking of the Shoto boys, perhaps the most intelligent; certainly the most imaginative. He knew Turk and his men held him and his brothers in supreme contempt. Lucky and dumb was the catchword that was beginning to spread about them. It always made him boiling mad. Sam, his oldest brother, had often tried to reason with him about that.

"Maybe we do look dumb, Shay," he had said. "What of it? It's to our advantage. Let 'em think it. Lots of people have and got fooled. Like that bunch of thieves we cleaned out of this country when we opened her up."

Shay couldn't see it always that way. Sometimes it was to their advantage and sometimes it wasn't. It wouldn't work out so good if any

of them ever wanted to get married. What chance would they have, could they have, with every girl, even down to dance hall girls, laughing at them.

"Take yourself, Sam," he had pointed out. "You always was as ugly as a bull buffalo and you ain't got any better lookin' since you lost your hair—"

Sam could always squelch Shay with a short, "Shut up, Shay," and he had then. Now Shay saw that Turk and his men had reached the ranch and had pulled up their horses, looking toward the river. Then he saw his father, giant Sixes Shoto, with his three other brothers, Sol, Sabe and Sid, come up from the river bed where they had been working on an irrigation ditch, and move towards the cabin. Shay was near enough to hear Turk's first words.

"Well, Shoto, I understand we're going to have a railroad in here. Where do you stand?"

Bix Sixes stroked his snow-white beard. That beard reached to his chest and he looked like an ancient patriarch. However, in spite of his sixty odd years there was nothing ancient about his mind nor his muscles. Bigger than his biggest son, there was yet power and metal in this old man—plenty of it. And there was a resonate, booming quality in his voice when he answered Turk.

"I'm for it. We need a railroad in here. It will make this country."

Turk said flatly, "Old man, you're crazy! It will ruin it. They're in Big Sink now and if we aim to stop them from crossing the desert we've got to work and work fast."

"I won't lift a hand," Sixes replied with the same inflexibility. "Not a hand, Turk. Ruther I would help them."

Turk stared with undisguised rage and amazement.

"This is pretty rich!" he cried. "Pretty damned rich! You fought your way in here across a hundred miles of desert and blizzards and cleaned out as mean a bunch of cutthroats as ever holed up anywhere, to *get away* from what a damned railroad always brings with 'em, and *now* you say you won't lift a hand to keep 'em out. You're *for* 'em. Old man, you're dumb. You're dumb as hell!"

His voice was loud and extremely insulting. It was so loud that Sam and Sim, who had gone into the cabin, heard and came out hastily. Shay was boiling again but he had to laugh at the way the sun blazed on Sam's freshly scrubbed bald head. He moved over with the other boys until they made a tight quarter circle, backing their father. Giants, every one of them, always ready to fight at the drop of their father's eyelid, and Shay often before even that. There was so much latent power there that even Turk, arrogant as he was, lost a little of his high-handed manner.

Bix Sixes took his time to answer and Shay had time to jab Sam with his elbow and whisper delightedly:

"I claim that big feller—"

Sam hissed back, "Shut up, Shay!"

Sixes had his words marshaled then. He threw them as blunt and direct as bullets:

"Turk, we didn't move in here to git away from any railroad. We moved in here to git away from land grabbin' hogs like yourself. We believe in *usin'* land. You believe in *holdin'* it. This section will support five hundred families if it's used our way. It won't support ten if it's used your way. We want a railroad, we need it. We opened up this country, Turk, and by God, we're goin' to have a railroad!"

Turk had eight men back of him. Every one wore a gun and knew how to use it. They were of the breed that lived by the gun. There wasn't a gun in the Shoto family except the old Winchester which Shay held. Yet in spite of this manifest advantage, Turk seemed to hesitate, daunted by the

blunt driving words of big Sixes. It was the big, brutish faced man who took up the challenge, and it was near him that Shay had chosen to stand.

"Turk," he bawled, "you can set there and eat dirt from these damned —if you want to, but I'll be damned if *I* do! Burn the damned Hoosiers down, fellers!"

He snatched for his gun, and Shay, tiptoeing, smote him a rattling blow on the jaw. Reaching up as he was obliged to, Shay couldn't put nearly his full power behind the blow, but it was enough to rattle this fellow's jaws and make him grab for the saddle horn. He hung there, swaying, his jaw loose and his eyeballs jerking back and forth in their sockets. Not another man moved.

Turk sat very still for a moment. Then he touched his horse with his spur.

"Ride on!" he snapped, and on they went, the big fellow still hanging to the saddle horn and still swaying. Sixes watched them cross their basin, heading for the benchland where Turk had established his headquarters.

"Boys," he said, "there's one of the few men I've met that I'm afraid of."

"Why, he's yellow to his toes!" exclaimed Shay. "Eight of them against us, and all of them heeled."

"He's got control," said Sixes, nodding his head.

"Control!" exclaimed Shay. "Control of what, pa?"

"Himself!" Sixes said grimly.

After dinner, when Sam and Sim arose to go back to their timber cutting, Sixes said. "Wait, boys. If the railroad *has* reached Big Sink that means they'll be gradin' the desert. I spoke to one of them surveyors that was runnin' the lines last spring and he said he didn't figure there would be any trouble about you boys gettin' on with the teams. We can use the money to buy machinery and the railroad can use your help. So get ready for an early start in the mornin'."

Shay said, half fearfully, "*All* of us?"

Big Sixes' beard twitched. "All of you. I can do what has to be done around here."

"Suppose Turk was to jump you while we was gone?" Sam asked his father.

"That ain't his style," replied the old man. "Besides, I figure he'll be back in Big Sink before you boys are."

CHAPTER II
Locoed Stranger

JUST as the sun rose out of the desert the next morning, six big Studebakers rolled out of Signal Pass and dropped down the long easy grade leading to the desert floor. The wagons were traveling light and fast and the big teams which pulled them were on the bit and surged down the slope, their ponderous hoofs pounding the hard earth. Each wagon carried double sideboards and in the high, lazy-backed seat of each was a Shoto, handling the reins.

Sam Shoto drove the lead team. Leadership was his because of his seniority. In absence of his father, his word was law and went unquestioned with these boys, for Sixes had hammered discipline into them via the heavy-hand method when they were very young, and parts of their anatomy exceedingly tender. Tender, at least under the hand of a three hundred pound man who could and had thrown more than one full grown steer by sheer strength.

Sam Shoto was not only the oldest of the boys, but he was also the ugliest. His lower jam was undershot, and stuck out like that of a good-natured bulldog. His nose turned up too, like a bulldog's, and his forehead bulged. But it was a clean, wholesome

ugliness, and from his neck down, a finer built man never wore boot leather.

By reason of his years Shay was in the tail-end position. The rambunctious baby of the family whooped and yelled and drove his wagon tongue against the endgate of Sid's wagon until Sid swore he'd come back and work over him if he didn't stop it.

"Then let them skates out!" Shay yelled back. "*I* could pull this wagon faster than we're goin'."

He stopped his attacks on Sid's endgate however, and when they hit the loose sand of the desert floor the pace *did* get slow. Shay stopped trying to crowd things and lay back in the lazy-backed seat while sand ran up the felloes of the wagon wheels and fell back with a whispering rustle not unlike the passage of a snake's scales over dry rock. The sun stepped higher and began to bear down.

Shay *had* to do something. So he began to sing. Two songs seemed to be about the limit of his capacity. One was about a Liza gal and the other dealt with railroad building over which Shay became so enthused that even the big Percherons seemed to become enthused with the same spirit. The prospect of five bucks a day and a roaring railroad town to cavort in was almost more than Shay could stand.

And because big Sixes knew that Shay, the youngest, was the kind to most likely paint considerable hell of his own brand over the landscape, he had warned each of the older boys to watch out for him and keep him out of trouble. Sam was for leaving him at home, but Sixes said no, the boy was busting to go and *would* bust if denied the privilege.

They stopped at noon, dropped the bits and fed the horses from nose bags. The sun was bearing down then with such intensity that it released the odor of turpentine and oils from the long dry wagon paint. Behind them, the notch that represented Signal Pass, was still sharp and distinct. Ahead a low murk hung on the horizon. Sam studied that murk.

"Must be a big fire over in the hills the other side of Big Sink," he guessed.

"Yeah and it might be smoke from the trains," said Shay.

Sam considered this, then nodded. "Reckon it might," he said. "Bit up, boys."

They were off again, and for the first time that day Shay was squelched. The heat and the dreary monotony of the steady plod across the dry wastes had gotten in their work. But as the sun sank lower and finally dropped behind the mountains and their shadows came racing out across the desert floor, bringing with it a delicious coolness, Shay went to work again, railroading. He was still railroading when Sam swung his team off the trail and motioned for his brothers to drop into camp formation. Teams were unhooked, and each brother did his allotted chores. Nobody rested until supper was over, then Sam began to throw down bed rolls.

Shay protested. "Let's talk a while. What's the use of rushin' off to sleep? Lots of things I want to talk about."

Sol, the long faced brother grinned in his slow way. "You talk away, Shay. We'll snooze, if you have no objections."

"Talk to what?" complained Shay. "This doggone wagon wheel?"

Sabe, the red faced one said pointedly, "At least it can't *hear* you."

Shay leaned resignedly against the wheel. "Wish I had a French harp!" he mourned.

"Wish all you please—since it won't do you no good," replied Sabe. "But I give you fair warnin'—if you go to buildin' any railroads tonight, I'll just naturally get up and work you over with a neckyoke."

"What's the matter with my songs?" Shay wanted to know.

"The songs ain't to blame—it's the *singin'*," retorted Sabe.

"Would I be allowed to hold my breath?" Shay asked with fine sarcasm. "Wait till we get to Big Sink. Wait till I get to draggin' down five bucks a day—"

Sam said, mildly, "Shut up, Shay."

SHAY shut up. The other boys rolled into their blankets but Shay sat there with his back against the wagonwheel and stared off under the reach of another wagon on the opposite side of the fire. He couldn't see anything but the wagonreach, and after the fire died down he couldn't even see that. His brothers' heavy breathing laid a background of continuous rhythm against the grinding of the horses' molars. A coyote broke into its weird mixture of yelps, whines and growls. It always had been a mystery to Shay how one little animal could make so many different sounds come out of his throat all at the same time.

After a while the horses stopped grinding and slept on their feet, as their slow breathing indicated. Something must have wakened one of them for Shay heard him give a whinny and saw his upraised head against the skyline, ears pricked desertward.

Shay got up and slipped outside the circle of wagons. He kept below the wagon box so he would not be outlined. He crouched there listening for what the horse either heard or scented. It might be the sneaking coyote and it might be a wolf. But horses didn't usually whinny at coyotes or wolves. They would be more likely to snort.

Presently he heard a faint scuffle—like a dry boot being drawn slowly—or cautiously—over the sand, then a sort of choking sound. After that there was silence for some time, then a slow, deliberate scratching. It didn't make sense and he felt his scalp prickle as one cold chill chased another down his back.

It wasn't an animal. The desert wind was blowing in from the sounds and he knew that the horses would have scented any animal and betrayed uneasiness. He stood up and reached for the rifle under the seat of that wagon. Just as he got it he heard a sort of choking cough. He lowered the rifle quickly, stepped around the wagon and shook Sam. Put his mouth close to Sam's ear.

"Somebody tryin' to sneak in on us," he whispered.

Sam was instantly wide awake. He listened a few moments, then he moved noiselessly outside the wagons and listened again. One of the horses said *ho-ho-ho* through his nose, softly, like a greeting.

Sam said aloud, "Light a lantern, Shay. That's somebody tryin' to crawl."

Shay lighted a lantern. The other boys were beginning to wake up then. "Stir up the fire," Sam said, taking the lantern, and moving boldly out towards the source of the sounds. Shay went with him.

A hundred feet out they came to the source of the sounds. It *was* a man, face down in the sand, and Sam turned the light on him and stood watching a moment. First one hand, then the other would reach out and come back. Then his legs would work. He had a little cavity scooped out before him, and another where his feet had dug. Behind him lay a plain trail of his crawling. But he didn't give any sign to show that he knew they they were standing over him.

"Hold the lantern," Sam thrust it into Shay's hands, then stooped and turned the man over.

His face was covered with a week old growth of sandy beard and his tangled hair, long and matted, hung down over his forehead so that his wild eyes looked even wilder staring

through it. But the one thing that caught Shay's notice and held it was his tongue. It hung out and was twice as big as a tongue had any right to be. It was dry as a rope and blackish. With his grinning teeth and emaciated face he would have looked like a dead man if it hadn't been for his eyes. They were plenty alive, and eerie.

"He's a goner, Sam," Shay said in an awed whisper.

Sam grunted, then picked him up as easily as if he were only a bundle of rags, carried him into the camp and put him down on some blankets.

"Let's have some water," he said.

Shay handed him a canteen, and Sam took the cap off, then held the canteen up and let water dribble on the man's tongue.

At first the water seemed to have no effect, but after a little while the man seemed to become aware of it. He moved his tongue a little, but he still could not draw it back into his mouth.

The other boys were all awake then, watching. "Pour some down him," suggested Sabe.

Sam shook his head. "Got to git his tongue back first—he'd choke," he said, and continued to let the water drip on the tongue. After a while the man got his tongue back into his mouth and began to snap at the water. Uncertainly at first, then ravenously, like a starved dog. Every time he snapped, his teeth clicked wickedly. Sam stopped dropping water as the man's mouth opened and shut.

"Might bite his tongue off," he said. "He's crazy as a loon. Gimme a spoon."

But when he attempted to pour a spoonful of water down the man's throat, the teeth closed on the spoon with such force that Sam had to pry the spoon out. But they kept working with him, getting a little water down him, but spilling more than he got. Shay became impatient.

"We ain't gettin' nowhere," he said. "Let me hold him."

"Watch out for him," Sam warned. "He'll snap at anything he can reach now."

"He might have hydrafoby," said Sol. "There's shore somethin' wrong with that guy—bad wrong."

Shay sat down flat on the sand and pulled the man across his thighs. As he did so he felt the clothing which was stiff and hard on his chest and back.

"Wait a minute, Sam," he said, and pulled his shirt open, baring the rib-studded torso. "Thought so," he grunted. "This guy's been shot."

THERE was a hole on his right side, about midway of his ribs, that was undoubtedly made by a bullet. It was not a fresh wound, for it was running matter and the edges were a fiery red.

"Turn him over," Sam said.

Shay turned him and they saw the hole where the bullet must have passed out. This hole was almost closed and didn't look so bad.

"Been crawlin' a long time," Sam pointed out. "It drained down. Look at them knees and elbows. Wore to the bone."

It was a sickening sight.

"Somebody," said Shay, "has shot this guy and left him for the buzzards. He's fooled both of 'em. He's starved."

"Make up some gruel, Sol," Sam directed.

Sol stirred up the fire and mixed up a muddy looking mixture which Sam attempted to feed the man while Shay held him—by his ears. It was like trying to feed a mad dog, for as soon as the fellow got a taste of it he began grabbing and snapping. He spilled the stuff all over himself and Shay until Sam grunted testily: "Can't you hold one little sick guy, Shay?"

"His ears is slippery," said Shay. "Wait till I get a new purchase. Now!

Pour it to him. If he moves he'll leave a couple of ears behind."

Sam fed him successfully then. But he had to be quick about it, for the fellow would have eaten the spoon if he could have caught it in his teeth.

"That's enough," declared Sam. "Kill him if we feed him too much. I figure he's been out nearly a week."

"Wish he could talk sense," said Shay. "All he does is snap and belch."

He slid the man off his knees and put him on the blankets. He was quieter now, and his eyes were half closed and dull.

Sam said, "We'll kinda keep him low till he does come to hisself and talks."

"Low?" said Shay. "Why low?"

"*Somebody* shot him," Sam said. "And it's a purty safe bet that they thought they killed him. One of us better take turns watchin' him. If he was to get to feed or water now he would kill hisself."

SHAY stood the last trick. It was pretty well towards morning then and the stranger was sleeping, or in a stupor. Anyway he was quiet. It was cold and when he awoke Sam to take his place he crawled into Sam's warm blankets for a final snooze before time to break camp. When he awoke, breakfast was ready and the other boys were all up and had the teams fed and harnessed.

"How's the Snapper?" he asked.

"Still snappin'," said Sam. "He's in my wagon."

"You reckon," said Shay, "one of us ought to try to backtrack him and try to find out what did happen?"

Sam took this under advisement for a moment. Then he shook his head. "No," he said. "It wouldn't be safe," and he turned his eyes towards the desert.

Shay didn't understand then just what Sam meant by that. He did about noon when he saw a body of riders coming up behind them, riding fast. Because he was driving the back wagon he got first look at them and he felt his blood quicken. It was Turk and his men. It occurred to Shay then that it wouldn't have been exactly pleasant for one of them, backtracking the wounded stranger, to have encountered Turk and his gang out there, alone.

He felt under the seat to make sure the rifle was ready for instant use, then he stood up and called forward:

"Be sure that tarpaulin is in place, Sam."

Sam looked back, as did the other boys. Then Sam turned about and drove steadily on. Shay made himself keep facing forward, but he could feel his back muscles squirm when the sound of the approaching horses grew plainer. Not one of the other boys looked back and Shay set his teeth and *made* himself follow their example. It was a pretty tough thing to do, especially when he found himself wondering if that fellow up there in Shay's wagon hadn't been shot in the back.

Turk and his men came sweeping up, split on both sides of the wagon and went driving on by. Turk did not even look towards the wagons, but the other men did. Particularly the big fellow, Brutis, as Shay had named him, and the little fellow, Mink. Brutis had a knot on his near jaw and the devil in the eyes he put on Shay. Shay grinned at him and worked his ears. Brutis showed his teeth too, but not in a grin; then they were past. Shay put his elbows on his knees and hunched forward, whistling softly, his eyes following them until the desert ahead was blank again. He was mighty glad then that Sam had turned down his proposal to backtrack the Snapper. Some more Shoto *luck*. Shay grinned over that one.

Sunset brought them within a mile of Big Sink. There Sam pulled out for camp. Shay protested vigorously.

"Let's go on in," he urged. "Blast

it, Sam, I want to spend the night in town—"

Sam said, "Shut up, Shay."

CHAPTER III
Strong Man's Play!

EVEN at the distance of a mile Shay could see the town was vastly changed. It was a different Big Sink from that which they had passed through three years ago on the way in. Then there had been only the big two-story saloon and gambling and dance hall, and a few other buildings. Even six months ago, when they were last out, the place had been about the same; only deader. The big saloon had been closed then. Shay bet it wasn't closed now because the town was boiling with energy.

A whole forest of railroad shacks had sprung up. He could see the mountainous piles of crossties, rails and other track building equipment. There were a lot of box cars being shunted about and the smoke from the engines made a cloud over the place. The yells from the whistles and the rumbling thunder of smiting couplings made the horses jump and squat and snort. Some of those horses, the younger ones, had never seen a railroad or a railroad train.

They fed the Snapper in Sam's wagon. He still snapped some, though not so wickedly. Sam examined his wound and guessed that it wouldn't kill him.

"Smells better," he said. "He may get his sense back anytime now."

"If he ever had any," said Sol.

After supper, Shay was sitting with his back against a wagon wheel, staring off towards the lights of Big Sink and wondering if he could risk slipping in there after the other boys had gone to sleep, when somebody hailed the wagons from the darkness that covered the camp.

Sam said, "Put the cover over my wagon," and stepped upon the brake beam of Shay's wagon.

"This the Shoto outfit?" asked the voice from the darkness.

"Part of it," Sam called back. "Ride in and show yourself."

Shay pulled the tarpaulin over Sam's wagon and stepped down as a man rode into the circle of light thrown from the fire and dismounted. He was so big Shay blinked. Almost as big as Sam and fully as ugly. Only his ugliness was not a good-natured ugliness like Sam's. It was a hard ugliness and there was a definite craft in this man's face; a deadliness, maybe. Certainly an authority, although Shay wasn't quite sure.

He let his horse's reins drop and stepped up to the fire, letting his look go from one to the other of the brothers. There was no humor in his face but Shay saw something pull at the corners of his hard mouth, then the man nodded. Sam let him talk first.

"Freightin'?" he said, and indicated the wagons.

"Maybe," said Sam cautiously. "Why, stranger?"

Shay saw no reason for concealing their reason for being there, so he said, "We aim to get us a job on the grade. Sam camped out here so I couldn't—"

Sam said, "Shut up, Shay."

The stranger looked at Shay directly for the first time. There was a definite pull at his mouth corners then. Shay guessed that he could be pretty agreeable, if he set out to be, also that he could be plenty tough, too.

"I rode out," he told Sam, "to get a line on the Little Egypt country. You boys was pretty lucky to get in there first. Who else is in there besides you?"

"Turk," said Sam.

"*Nobody* else?" the man questioned sharply.

Sam said bluntly, "Mister, you can

find out all you want to know about that country the same way we did."

Shay grinned to himself. Sam was getting more like their father every day. The stranger pulled out a pipe, tamped tobacco into it, squatted and pulled a brand out of the fire. When he applied it to the pipe it threw a low glow on his face, bringing out its ruggedness. As he stood up, the Snapper threw a leg against the wagon box. Shay saw how quickly the stranger's eyes shifted.

"Live stock?" he said, but made no motion towards the wagon.

"Calves," Shay said quickly. "We're pretty big eaters and we kind of figured meat might be scarce over here."

"It is," said the man dryly. "A dollar a pound." He looked at them again and shook his head slightly. "Shoto luck," he said. "You just can't beat it."

He turned back to his horse, swung up slowly. Looked at them again over the horse's head, then he said, "So long," and rode off towards town.

Sam turned to Shay, "Next time a stranger comes around, *I'll* do the talkin'," he said. "And don't you forget that."

"Yeah," said Shay, "you'll do the *talkin'*. You mean you'll *not* do the *talkin'*."

"I'll do all that's done," replied Sam.

"If I hadn't told him there were calves in that wagon he'd took a look," Shay said. "And he was *lookin'* for *something* that he didn't find."

"He wouldn't have took no look," replied Sam. "Let's bed down."

IT was tantalizing, to say the least, to lay there wide awake, as Shay did, with Big Sink so near and so intriguing. Shay couldn't sleep. His imagination was too active. He could not understand how his brothers could sleep with a chance to celebrate so nearby.

Not since they had come into the Little Egypt country had he seen as many as twenty men in one place. And outside their mother and sister, nary a woman except dancehall girls who had been at the big saloon when they first came in. Last time in town they weren't even there.

But the first time—Shay grinned as he recalled that fat one called Mamie. She wore an awful pretty dress and it was awful short. She had silver buckles on her shoes and silk stockings with fancy yellow garters, ruffled around the edges. He chuckled to himself, remembering how red Sam's face had gotten when she kicked her shoe at him. Their father had termed the place the sink-hole of hell, but Shay had sort of enjoyed it. He knew all that old outfit was gone now, but with all the railroad money flowing there must be something and maybe some girls as pretty as Mamie. Only Shay wanted them a little slimmer and younger. That Mamie had been all fixed up and acted young, but Shay knew she wasn't so young. She hadn't fooled him. Her nose was too sharp and her eyelids too thin, and her breasts—"

Shay sat up. He was wider awake now than he had been when he lay down. The lights over the railroad camp were mighty bright. All his brothers were sleeping profoundly. He reached out, found his hat and put it on. Then he took a boot in each hand, got up as noiselessly as a cougar and slipped out in the darkness, heading towards those lights. He walked in his stockinged feet a good quarter of a mile before he stopped to put his boots on. Then he had to take his socks off to shake the sand out of them. If Sam caught him at this there'd be a fight sure as shootin'. Shay sighed a little at that thought, because he knew Sam would get plenty of help from the other boys—if he needed it.

He wasn't sure that Sam would need it. He *was* sure that they were all primed to set on him plenty, because

he had seen his father give each one of them low instructions, and he knew it was about him by the way they all looked towards him. Well, he might not be able to keep all of them off him, but he could outguess them. Anyhow, he was perfectly willing to trade a good mauling for a few hours of fun and association with other people. Somebody he didn't have to look at every morning, noon and night.

WHEN Shay came into Big Sink, he saw only the people who were moving towards the big saloon and dance hall, or whatever it was now. He moved in the same direction because all life seemed to center around that place. Three years ago it had been busy. Tonight it was a roaring bedlam.

It had been changed since their last visit; painted, for one thing, and the double swinging door had been boarded up and separate doors had been cut on either side. Over one of these doors there was the sign, "Hotel"; over the other, "Bar." "Bar" had far the most business, so Shay chose that door.

When he stepped inside he saw that the interior hadn't been changed much. The big room was a little narrower because a partition had been put up on the hotel side and people could, he guessed, go upstairs without coming through the barroom. They could go upstairs from the barroom too, for the same short stair led up to the low balcony over the bar, and another short stair led from the balcony to the upper floor.

The barroom was crowded with railroaders. Two men stood facing each other near the bar, their hands gripping a broomstick held high as they could reach. One of them was a big redheaded, redbearded man, and the other was a big blackheaded man. The redheaded man's hair and beard were red as a brush fire.

Everybody was watching them, including a man behind the bar who wasn't a bartender. A black mustache decorated his lip and he had a cigar in his teeth.

Somebody shouted, "Two to one on Paddy."

Nobody seemed to be in a hurry to take the bet and Shay moved closer, grinning, because he had played that game many a time with his brothers. The big redheaded man growled, "Say when!"

"Now!" said the other man, and instantly the two of them threw their power into the stick. Paddy, the redhead, won easily. The blackheaded man fell back and blew ruefully on his palms. Paddy looked around the room.

"Ain't there nobody can grip a broomstick?" he challenged. Then he saw Shay. He couldn't very well have missed seeing him for Shay stood a full head above the tallest in that place. Paddy blinked, then he pointed the broomstick at Shay.

"Come here, me b'y," he said.

Shay came readily enough. Paddy said, "Ain't you one of thim Shoto b'ys?"

Shay nodded. "Baby of the family," he said.

Paddy stared at him. Then he made an O with his mouth and whistled soundlessly.

"Th' baby!" he growled. "Bigod, and if you're that, I'm wonderin' what the men look like! What's a babe like you doin' in a man's town?"

"Lookin' for a job," said Shay. "We come over to try to get on the grade."

"A job is ut?" said Paddy, his eyes suddenly sparkling. He waggled the broomstick, "Well, b'y I'll find ye a job—if you got the grip of a man in your hands." He waggled the broomstick again and winked at the black mustached man behind the bar. "Grip me and a job is yours." And he winked again.

"There's six of us," said Shay

quickly. "Do I have to grip you six times?" He was beginning to enjoy this. Paddy and the entire crowd plainly took him for an overgrown, rather dumb back-country boy.

"Wance fer ivery job," said the Irishman solemnly. "Fair enough, ain't it?" He held the stick up.

Shay took hold of it, then he let loose quickly. "How do I know *you* can get us jobs?" he asked. "You may be just a common bum for all I know."

The crowd roared, Paddy with them.

"You ain't so dumb, b'y!" he cried. "Faith, and I believe they've been slanderin' you boys. Me name's Paddy Mines. I'm boss of the track crew. Ask anybody in here."

"I'll take your word for it," said Shay. "But I aim to hold you to the bargain—a job for all six of us. We all work or none."

"All or none," said Paddy briskly. "So be it, b'y."

SHAY was a good six inches the taller, but Paddy's arms were of such length that Shay had to reach to get the stick. Paddy's shoulders were broad, unbelievably broad. He was a much bigger man than he seemed at first glance and he was muscled like a stallion. Shay had to grin a little when he noticed Paddy's manner of gripping the stick, with his thumbs pointing inward. Sam had always gripped a stick that way, and had never come to understand why Shay could beat him so easily. Shaw knew why, but he never told. He didn't tell Paddy, now, that he was gripping the stick wrong.

And Paddy must have sensed something, for he shot Shay an appraising glance and rocked the stick lightly to test Shay's grip. Shay had it on the cushions of his palms, lightly, and he let it rock with the cushion, but he didn't let it slip, for a slip, even a light one, spoiled the seal.

Suddenly the man behind the bar with the barkeeper leaned over and touched Paddy's arm.

"Be fair with the boy, Paddy," he said. "He ain't got a chance with—"

"Be quiet, Toy!" growled Paddy. "I didn't say he couldn't have a job unless he gripped me, did I?" He rocked the stick again. "Say when, b'y!" he growled.

Shay set his teeth. "Now!" he said, and drove his full power into his grip, his full weight on the stick. The stick came down in an even sweep and the crowd roared. He was easier than Sam, Shay knew, and lifted the stick again.

"Two to one on yourself, Paddy?" yelled somebody back in the crowd. "Here's ten on young Shoto."

Paddy showed his teeth but he did not reply to the challenge.

"I'll give the word this time, me bucko," he said softly. "Me hands was sweaty that time."

He rubbed them briskly on his big thighs. Then he laid his grip on the stick again.

"Say when," said Shay.

"NOW!" roared big Paddy and poured the full power of his grip into the stick. Shay's smooth cheeks suddenly bulged with hidden muscles, for Paddy had almost jumped the gun. The cushions of his hands gave a little and Paddy's eyes suddenly fired. Then Shay's full power went into the grip and the stick locked. Steadily Shay forced it down, down, and Paddy, his forehead corded and purple suddenly let out a retching groan and the stick dropped.

"That's twice," said Shay and held up the stick again.

"No, b'y," said Paddy. "Not tonight. Nor no other night bigod with you. Come over to me office in th' mornin' —all six av ye."

Men crowded around to hit Shay on the back and shout their approval. If he had accepted all the drinks offered him he would have been swamped. Shay was feeling pretty

good. He looked around in search of more opposition.

"Anybody else?" he asked.

Somebody touched his arm. "Here, kid, let's see what you have got."

Shay turned. It was the big, ugly fellow that had stopped at their camp. Shay hadn't liked him then; he liked him less now. He was uglier, tougher, now that he could see him better. Shay held up the stick and grinned.

"Say when," he said.

The man laid hold of the stick, and when Shay saw him point his thumbs outward he knew he was in for it. The crowd surged closer. There were shouts of "Take him, young Shoto!" "Tear his hands off!" "Five bucks on young Shoto!" It made Shay feel pretty good. They were pulling for him—it was his sort of a crowd.

"Say when!" he said again.

The little pull showed at the other's mouth corners again.

"Suppose we let Paddy give the word," he suggested, and sucked in a deep breath. Shay had never seen a man's chest lift so high.

Paddy put his hands on his hips and spread his legs.

"Git ready, b'ys—NOW!" he roared.

Shay wasn't fooling any this time. He put all he had into the stick, and he poured it in there with the sudden muscular contraction that is possessed only by the young and mentally alert. The stick started down, stopped, and there it locked, actually vibrating with the fierce stress those two put into it.

The man's eyes seemed to sink back into his head, but there was no sign of defeat showing on his face. The room became entirely soundless—even breathless. Then slowly the stick came down, so slowly its movement was scarcely perceptible. It was not turning in Shay's hands—not unless it was taking the meat with it; Shay was sure of that, and if it was turning in his hands there was no pain. Yet somehow he knew that it was not turning in this other man's hands either.

He let his pent up breath go, and coming up on his tiptoes, put his full power and weight into it. There was a rending of wood, then there between their hands, Shay saw the tough wood of that handle suddenly roil and bloom into a million pulpy fibers. Their hands dropped.

Somebody in the crowd yelled hysterically: "Twisted it in two!"

It was so, and Shay felt himself suddenly furious. That stick had saved the big, ugly brute. Shay cast the section of stick he held, away, and cried:

"Bring us a shovel handle! We'll try it again."

"No!" said the ugly man, and looked at the palms of his hands. "Not tonight, Kid." He turned towards the bar and spoke to the man with the black mustache, something that Shay could not hear. But he saw the mustached man's eyes jerk briefly, then he motioned for the ugly man to come around the bar and the two of them went through a door back.

CHAPTER IV
Hell-Fighter!

SHAY had recovered both sections of the broomstick. He held them carefully, as if they were something to be treasured, then he started for the door, plowing through the crowd with little regard for whom he jostled or shouldered. Somebody touched his arm. It was the bartender. On the bar was a tall bottle, opened, and a glass.

The bartender indicated the bottle. "Best we've got, brother," he said. "Have one—on the house. You're a man, all the way around."

Shay had never drunk as much as a quart of strong liquor in his life. But he had drunk enough to know

that nothing damned a person in a crowd like this so much as inability to put down a drink of whiskey properly. He knew, too, that the only way to get a drink of strong whiskey down without strangling was to literally hold your breath and throw it down quickly.

So he poured the whiskey glass full, tipped back his head and hurled it down his throat in the most approved fashion. Then to be doubly sure, he poured another glass full and sent it chasing after the first.

The bartender looked at him with respect. "You're a man, young Shoto," he repeated. "All the way around. Have another. Hell, kill the bottle!"

Shay decided that now was as good time as any to get drunk—really drunk. He never had been drunk and he had always wanted to know just how it felt.

"Don't want to be a hog," he said.

"Go ahead, go ahead!" said the bartender. "It was worth it to see you show Paddy up. Reckon maybe he'll leave some room for cash customers from now on. Go right ahead."

Shay didn't tell him Paddy was easy compared with the other fellow. Nor that even a broomstick wasn't often twisted in two pieces by two men. He pushed the whiskey glass aside.

"Kinda slow with that," he said, then waved for the big bottle. "This the stoutest you got—tastes kinda weak beside Pap's moonshine."

The bartender sort of jerked his head in, then he caught the bottle and pointed to the label.

"A hundred and twenty proof, brother," he said. "It don't come much stouter than that."

Shay took back the bottle. Grinned at the crowd.

"Guess it will do—if there's enough of it," he said, and started to turn the bottle up. It was snatched out of his hand. Shay looked around and then he looked down. A girl had the bottle in her hand and she was looking at the bartender with fire in her eyes. It wasn't the fat girl Mamie. This was a different sort of a girl altogether. Her eyes were as blue as mountain lupine and her mouth as red as Indian paintbrush. She wore a dark dress and a white apron which came up over her breasts and lay primly about her neck. She didn't have silver buckles on her shoes, but she did have on silk stockings. Shay could see her ankle and a slender portion of her leg.

She spoke directly to the barman: "You ought to be ashamed, Ben! Trying to get this boy drunk!"

There was a roar of laughter from the room. Ben, the bartender, grinned.

"*Boy!*" he exclaimed. He hit Shay on the shoulder. "She say's you're a *boy*, Shoto! Ask her to point out a few *men*. You better get along upstairs and stay, Miss Madge, before your paw ketches you down here."

The girl set the bottle on the bar, hard. Then she caught Shay's arm. "Come up on the balcony with me," she said. "I want to talk to *you*. You're much too nice a boy to carouse with these sots."

Shay grinned at her, picked up the bottle and stuck it in his hip pocket. "Anything you say," he said gallantly. "Hang on."

She hung on as he plowed through the crowd towards the stairs leading to the balcony. It was a good-natured crowd, an applauding crowd. More than one approving railroader staggered him with tremendous open-handed backslaps as he passed them. Just as they reached the foot of the stairs some giant with a voice like a bull and a hand like a sledge smote him mightily and roared:

"Go it, Shoto! Make her come across once, she never—"

The rest was lost in the roar from the crowd. Shay felt his face burn, looked down as the girl's glance whipped up at him, her lower lip caught in her teeth; her face was crimson, too.

THERE were only a few people on the balcony. One was a stringy-haired young man with a cigarette pasted on his lower lip, and he only played a piano listlessly, his eyes closed. Two couples of men, one of each couple with a handkerchief tied around his arm, shuffled through a sort of dance. Shay allowed the girl to shove him into a seat but he watched these men curiously. The bottle hurt his hip so he pulled it out and set it on the table, still watching the men.

"What's the handkerchief for?" he asked the girl, pointing to the dancers.

"The one that wears it is the girl," she explained. "Dad don't allow no dancehall girls around this place."

Shay grinned. "First time I was here they was plenty of them." He looked at the bottle. "Doggone! Forgot to bring a glass."

"Please don't—"

"Don't what?" said Shay surprised.

"Don't try to act like a tough guy. You're not that sort. Here, take this." She put something in his hand—a key, and closed his fingers on it when he sat and stared at it stupidly.

Shay said, a little thickly, "You got me wrong—"

"Be still and listen to me. Go up to number ten, but don't let anybody see you go. I'll be up as soon as I can—Charlie is there."

"Charlie!" said Shay. "You're pullin' them too fast—"

She gave him a little push. "Now! there's nobody looking—quick—" Her voice abruptly broke off.

Shay went. He didn't understand what it was all about, but he knew that this girl was powerfully affected by something. So he went up the short stair leading to the second floor and found himself in a dark corridor with doors on either hand. It was too dark to read numbers so he counted doors until he reached ten, then he scratched a match. Ten it was. He fitted the key into the lock and opened the door, stepped in and closed the door behind him.

There was a low burning lamp on a table, and a man just struggling to a sitting position on the bed. When Shay saw his face he half recoiled. Was it a ghost or was it the Snapper? Or were those two drinks getting to him already?

He found his mouth suddenly dry. Then the ghost, or Snapper, spoke.

"Better lock that door. Where's Madge?"

Shay locked the door. "Downstairs," he said, then came closer for a better look. "Where in thunderation did you come from and how—"

"One of your wagons, I imagine," said the Snapper. "You're one of the Shotos, ain't you?"

Shay nodded. Somebody knocked on the door lightly.

"That's Madge," said the Snapper. "Let her in."

Shay unlocked the door and the girl slipped through quickly. She was breathing fast and her face was pale.

"Did you tell him, Charlie?" she asked.

The Snapper shook his head, then lay back on the bed. "You do the talkin', Madge. I'm beat out."

"This is my brother, Charlie," explained the girl. "He wants you to tell him what happened."

"All I know is we picked you up out there in the middle of the desert with a bullet hole through you, crazier than a loon," Shay said. "We put you in a wagon and brought you in. Who shot you?"

Charlie Toy's face darkened. "Turk!"

"Why?" asked Shay.

"Because—" Toy hesitated.

"Tell him the truth, Charlie," said the girl. "We've got to trust somebody."

"Well, here it is. I got mixed up with a bunch of car thieves down in the Paloose country. Turk was the head of it. A man by the name of Still-

dust—Special Agent for the railroad, nailed me. He told me he'd make it easy for me if I'd squeal on the others, but I knew that old gag. I got out on bond, jumped the bond and found out my folks had moved in here. Then Turk showed up. I reckon he was afraid of me—afraid I would squeal. Anyway he let me have it, right out there in the desert and left me for dead. That's about all I remember exceptin' wakin' up in a wagon out there an hour ago. Now I am in a jam. Both sides are lookin' for me."

"I've been trying to get him—" began the girl and stopped as someone rapped on the door and a hard voice called:

"Open up, there!"

The girl went white as a sheet. Charlie Toy whispered. "That's him—that's the Special Agent, Stilldust."

THE girl looked at Shay appealingly. Shay had to think fast. He had been getting a big kick out of playing the buffoon all this time because people seemed to expect it of him, and like him for it. But this was a time when that business wouldn't work. So he stepped over with a long noiseless stride, picked Charlie Toy from the bed and slid him under it in a single motion. Then he tossed his hat and jacket on the bed and motioned for the girl to unlock the door.

She bit her lip again, but did so. There stood the big ugly fellow, looking twice as big and four times as mean as he ever had. He had his arms folded on his chest and he stepped into the room a foot or two and stopped, his eyes ranging over the three people.

Shay said indignantly, "Who invited *you* to the party, mister?"

Suddenly the man—Stilldust—caught the girl's arm. He twisted it slowly and said through his clenched teeth:

"Come across — where's your brother? No foolin'—I mean business. *Where is he?*"

The girl cried out in agony, and Shay took one long step and smashed the Special Agent on the ear. The blow hurled the man back against the wall where he rebounded.

He was tough. He didn't go down, just spread his legs and swayed a little. His lips drew back from his teeth and his right hand went up under his coat towards the armpit. Shay caught a glimpse of blued steel there.

"That's right, you big bluff!" he cried. "Go on, pull a gun on me. That's about your size, you blasted woman-beater!"

Stilldust suddenly pulled his feet together and dropped his hand, empty. Again Shay saw that curious tug at his mouth corners. He looked at the girl and jerked his head towards the door.

"Get out!" he said.

She threw her head back. "I will not! This is *my* room!—not yours."

"Stay then, damn you!" Stilldust turned to Shay. "You think you're pretty tough, don't you, kid? You've been cuttin' a pretty big swathe tonight. Well, I think I'm pretty tough too, and I think maybe a little takin' down will do you good. Let's see who really *is* tough."

Shay leveled his finger at him. "That gun under your arm," he pointed out. "Break a man's hand, if he was to hit it just right."

Stilldust almost grinned, then pulled out a big Peacemaker and put it on a table.

"You wouldn't give a damn how many ribs it would break—if it was hit just right, would you?"

"I aim to break your neck," Shay told him.

Without warning Stilldust came at him, driving hard. His powerful shoulders rocked rhythmically. One bullet hard fist drove Shay's head back and another slammed into his body. Another exploded on his jaw and

something went *boom!* inside his head.

But he got his hands up then and his longer reach held the other off until his mind could clear and his legs steady. This man was not only tough, he was scienced. He knew how. Shay wasn't scienced, but he had the advantage of always having to hold his own with a bunch of big, tough boys all older and stronger than himself. He had been hit before, plenty of times and he knew how to take it. So if Stilldust's intention had been to stampede him with that first hard rush, he failed, for Shay didn't stampede worth a cent.

Stillwell was grinning then, a mirthless grin, and there was a light akin to admiration growing in his eyes. Shay stopped grinning and a moment later he sneaked in a short one that drove Stilldust's teeth together with an audible clash. Then Shay hit him in the place the gun had been and the wind came out of Stilldust with a grunt.

It really got rough then. Shay hit him with about everything he had ever learned to hit with, and the fellow hit Shay with a lot of things that didn't feel like fists at all—more like sledges or brass knucks.

Shay did remember to keep him away from the bed. Then they were out in the hall, going at it hammer and tongs. Doors were opening and people were shouting. Once or twice he heard a woman scream. Then they were plunging down the short stairs to the balcony. The crash of their two big bodies almost wrecked it. Shay happened to land on top and was able to first gain his feet. Below, in the barroom, a big voice bellowed:

"Ten bucks on young Shoto!"

Stilldust had taken most of the shock of that tremendous fall. He was a little slow getting up. Shay sure hated to see him get to his feet again, for he was beginning to suspect that the fellow was really tough.

So he took advantage of him. He caught him, as Stilldust got up on his hands and knees, by the collar and the crotch. He swung him once to get momentum, then he let him go. Stilldust hit the top of the balcony railing, went through it as if it were paper and plunged headfirst into the gaping, shouting crowd below.

It was an eight-foot drop, but the crowd was so dense that they couldn't get out of his way and he mowed down a dozen or more when he struck.

Then Shay saw Sam and two of his other brothers charging for the stairs. He couldn't be sure of two of them because his eyesight wasn't any too good then. But he couldn't mistake Sam. He had the only baldhead in the house.

Shay heard Sam swear for one of the few times in his life as he reached for him.

"You damned young hellion!" said Sam.

CHAPTER V
Hero's Reward

JUST as the sun cleared the mountains next morning, a work train pulled into the Big Sink Yards. On the end of the work train was a glittering, shining private car. Paddy Mines, just out of his bunk shack, rubbed his eyes when he saw that private car. He knew where that car went, also went Henry Teed, superintendent of the entire mountain division. And he knew too, that Henry Teed didn't ride around for his health. So when a shortish, stocky man, dressed in a shapless blue serge, stepped out on the brass bound platform of that car and motioned his arm at Paddy, Paddy went at a tall trot, his long arms swinging.

"And what brings you up here, Mister Teed?" he asked respectfully.

Teed uttered a single explosive word: "Turk!"

"That scum?" said Paddy and raised his eyebrows. "What—"

"Come inside," said Teed.

Paddy followed him into the car, dwarfing this smaller man with his bulk. Teed dropped into a seat near the door and motioned for Paddy to sit down.

"You seen Al Stilldust around town?" the superintendent asked.

Paddy nodded. "Seen him at Toy's last night—playin' horse wid the b'ys." He scrubbed his hand across his beard with a rasping sound and his eyes looked worried. "First the Special Agint, then the Super—faith and it must be serious, Mister Teed."

"Serious!" blurted Teed. "We're tied into a knot—we're stopped cold. That damned Turk has got a piece of land including the Gap over there," Teed waved his hand violently, "and has slapped an injunction on us so tight we couldn't pry it loose with dynamite. You know what that means?" Teed yelled, glaring at Paddy as if he were to blame.

Paddy said, "Yis sir!" in an awed voice.

"It means," went on Teed, "we're stopped. It means we'll lose every dollar we've poured into this damned line. It means I'll get the ax, and so will you and so will—ah, come in Al, come in!"

Al Stilldust stopped in the doorway of the car, almost cutting off the light. The sun was behind him and neither of the men in the car could see his face clearly until he stepped through. Then Teed stifled an exclamation and said, "What in the devil hit you, Al—a rock crusher?" The superintendent frowned.

Al Stilldust moved very cautiously. He sat down so slowly, so carefully, so *creakingly*, that Paddy Mines forgot the presence of the superintendent and let out such a roar of laughter that the windows in the car rattled.

Al Stilldust sat and looked grimly at Paddy with his one good eye. Then he turned to Teed.

"What hit me?" he asked. "Harry, I be damned if I can rightly recall. But I think it wore the name of Shoto at the outset." Paddy gagged and Al Stilldust looked at him, then continued, "That name, Harry, is a base deception. It don't give a man any indication of what it covers—none at all."

Paddy collapsed. Teed could see nothing amusing in this at all. He scowled.

"Have you got anywhere with Turk? Anything—*anything* at all, Al? Damn it, the man must leave a hole someplace."

Stilldust said, "Here's my story, Harry. I've scouted all around and I can't find hair nor hide of young Toy. He's our only hope. You know that. I did make his father admit that he'd been here, but he swore he didn't know where he was now. Well, I slipped up to the girl's room—young Toy's sister, intending to make her come clean." Stilldust paused then as if the recollection of what had followed was exceedingly painful. "The thing, Harry, that hit me was in that girl's room. I left it before I wanted to, before," Stilldust winced, "the girl even asked me to. Anyhow," he concluded more briskly, "I was following a bum steer. I don't believe either the girl nor old Toy knows where the boy is."

"Do you?" Teed asked.

"I think I do, Harry. He's where he'll never do us any good—dead. Turk just the same as told me so not more than ten minutes ago."

"Did that brazen scoundrel dare to intimate that he'd killed him?"

"He made it plainer than that, Harry. Of course he didn't say that *he* had killed young Toy, but he did convince me that he was dead."

Teed slumped in his seat. "There must be some way—some—"

"There is," said Stilldust. "Turk

is broke. And he's changed his mind about turnin' that Little Egypt country into a sort of private cattle empire. You have any idea why he changed, Harry?"

"No—no, go on!" exclaimed Teed.

Al Stilldust seemed to have a maddening tendency to avoid coming to the crux of things. "I think I know what changed his mind, Harry. Six, big, young Shotos, and another bigger, harder older one. We've made a bad mistake, Harry. If we'd gone to those fellows at the start, Turk would never have lighted in Little Egypt and you wouldn't be looking an injunction in the face. Those boys," continued Stilldust, "have been basely maligned. And this Shoto luck that is the talk of the country is a myth. There's no flies on any of those fellows and don't ever let anybody try to tell you different. Turk is even smarter than I give him credit for. He found out that fact before anybody else did, apparently."

Shay and Girdler were locked in deadly combat as the girl lifted the gun in nerveless fingers.

"*Will* you come to the point?" implored Teed.

"Here it is—Turk is not at all particular about staying in Little Egypt. He's ready to lift that injunction—for a price. A long price, Harry. A cool hundred thousand."

Teed jumped to his feet and screamed: "I'll see him in *hell* first."

Paddy Mines crossed himself devoutly. Stilldust said nothing.

Teed said, more quietly, "What would *you* do, Al?"

Al Stilldust sighed. "Give, Harry, *give*."

Harry Teed got up and walked the length of the car and back, gnawing at his lower lip.

"We can stand the ticket," he said, "but the thought of paying that damned scoundrel—Al, it just won't down."

Al Stilldust said, "He's down at Toy's Hotel now. I told him I'd put it before you and you'd have to make the decision. Suppose we walk down there and talk to him."

Teed said, "I ought to make the damned scoundrel come here!"

"Of course," said Stilldust. "But you know, Harry, Turk is sort of enjoying this. If I was you I'd let him have all the fun he can—it'll be cheaper."

Teed said, "All right, let's go. I want to get this over with. You come along too, Paddy. There's no telling what will happen when you're dealing with a scoundrel like Turk."

AS THEY walked across the yards, Stilldust continued to talk.

"Harry, I hate this worse than you do. On account of young Toy. There's guts in that boy. Otherwise he would have squealed on Turk when I offered him an out. Going to be tough on his father and sister when they learn the truth, too."

Teed looked out toward the desert and saw the six big Studebakers just getting into motion. "What outfit is that?" he asked.

"That," said Stilldust regretfully, "is the outfit we ought to have played ball with from the first. That is the Shotos."

When they reached the hotel, Turk

was waiting out in front. He raised his eyebrows with well assumed surprise and lifted his hat at Teed.

"This *is* an honor," he said mockingly. "The superintendent in person."

"Cut out the horseplay, Turk," said Teed shortly. "I'm ready to talk business. But any more dirty cracks and I'll fight you till hell's a snowbank. Will anyhow if Al says the word."

"Where can we talk?" asked Al Stilldust hastily.

"The bar is closed—suppose we go up to my room," said Turk.

As they stepped into the place, Toy, the proprietor came out of the barroom.

"You can stop down here if you want to, Paddy," said Stilldust.

Paddy turned promptly towards the barroom while the other three continued up the stairs.

In the corridor above, Turk rapped at a door. "Open up, Girdler," he said.

The door was opened and they went in. The big brutish man was there, and the little minkish one.

"You boys can get out," Turk said. "Get the other boys up and bring the horses around and wait till I come down."

Girdler looked hard at Al Stilldust.

"Reckon—" he begun.

"Get out!" said Turk.

Just as the door closed against them, the door of number ten opened and Madge Toy started out. When she saw Girdler and the Mink fellow, she stepped back quickly and attempted to close the door. Girdler stopped it with his toe, grinned over his shoulder at Mink, then slowly forced it open.

AT ABOUT that instant the Shoto boys were pulling up before the hotel, having seen Paddy Mines enter the place with Stilldust and Teed. Sam Shoto got down, and so did Shay, Shay a little gingerly. Shay pushed open the door and called, "Mr. Mines in here?" He glanced around.

From the bar Paddy boomed: "Don't know th' animal, but *Paddy* Mines is prisint. Come in, b'ys."

Just as Shay stepped through the door a woman's scream came ripping down the stairs.

Overhead a door crashed, another and another, then a six-shooter's bellowing cadence rocked the ceiling. Shay went up those stairs with Paddy after him, gripping a half-filled whiskey glass in his hand. Paddy carried that glass up the stairs without spilling a drop, arriving in time to see Shay slam a bunched shoulder against the door of number Ten and crash it inward. Then men with guns in hand seemed to spill from every door along the corridor and Paddy heard the hard heavy rush of the Shoto boys from the wagons.

The first man into the corridor was Turk, and he came with drawn six-shooter. Shay had already plunged through the door of number Ten, and the first man that Turk saw was Paddy heaving up those stairs with his right hand held up before him. Turk instantly snapped a shot at Paddy and the heavy ball struck the thick-glassed whiskey glass and blew Paddy's face full of powdered glass and whiskey. Paddy unleashed a fearful howl, clawed at his face streaming with both whiskey and blood, then fell backward down the stairs nearly bowling Sam Shoto over as he fell.

Al Stilldust, following Turk from the room and wondering what had touched off this unexpected fuse, saw Paddy fall and still clawing at his face. He also saw Turk with smoking gun in hand, and naturally surmised that Turk had killed Paddy. So he slammed Turk over the head with the barrel of his heavy Peacemaker and laid him on the floor with a four-inch gash in his head, for dead, he hoped. Then Turk's other men came racing from their rooms and the

Shotos came leaping up the stairs, headed by baldheaded Sam. The hotel corridor became a bedlam.

IN NUMBER TEN, when Girdler had forced the door against Madge Toy and drove in, followed by Mink, neither of the two had any inkling that Charlie Toy was in that room. Girdler had his whole attention focused on the girl whom he instantly seized. Mink, seeing the bearded skeleton on the bed looking at him with eyes unnaturally bright, and startled half out of his senses by thus encountering a man whom he believed long dead, whipped out his sixshooter and slammed the entire six shots, point-blank at the spectre—and missed every shot.

That was when Shay came through the door, throwing it open so violently that it rebounded and closed as he lunged through. Mink, whirling, snapped the empty gun in his face and Shay knocked him clear across the room. He half turned as he heard Madge's scream of warning and received a glancing blow on his shoulder delivered by Girdler's clubbed gun. The blow would have caved his skull in had it landed there, for it cracked the bone in Shay's shoulder and disabled his left arm. Girdler did not attempt to repeat the blow, but backed away while Madge tried to seize his gun hand, Shay went after him.

He shouted at her to get out of the way so he could close on the man, knowing it was his only chance, but the girl either misunderstood his motive or was so confused that she couldn't act intelligently, for she hung on to Girdler's upper arm while he snapped three shots at Shay, all of which came murderously close.

It maddened Girdler to miss at such close range, so he gave his arm a flick and hurled the girl from him as Shay drove headlong before Girdler could get the gun lined again. He struck Girdler's midriff with his shoulder and slammed him against the wall, pinning him there. The impact drove the wind out of the big man and he dropped the gun. Shay gave it a kick in the girl's direction, then disregarding the pain in his injured shoulder he whipped a deadly headlock on Girdler and grimly settled down to crack either his skull or his neck. Girdler uttered one strangled bellow as something cracked and the strength went out of him. A gun bellowed behind Shay as he turned to see what had become of Mink, but Mink was falling with blood spurting from between his fingers held over his face. Shay looked at the girl. She was slumped down on the floor in a pitiful heap, but from the gun which lay under her now nerveless fingers curled a lethal smoke whisp.

Sam's bald head came ramming through the door and he peered fiercely through the fog of powder smoke. He saw Shay cross to the girl and start to pick her up, grunted and withdrew.

"All over in there, boys," he told his brothers. "Shay didn't get hurt much."

Downstairs they found Paddy washing his bloody face with fingers that visibly trembled. Paddy was scared that he was blinded by the powdered glass. But he wasn't. His tough face was literally cut to ribbons by that exploding whiskey glass, but not a piece had entered his eyes. Even his eyelids were cut, which probably explained it: Paddy had his eyes shut when the glass exploded in his hand. He looked up at those big Shotos staring down at him with their curiously calm eyes.

"B'ys, let this teach ye a lessin," he said solemnly. "Always control yer appetites, for if I had stopped to dhrink that glass av likker I wid have been a dead man now!"

And it was the truth too.

AL STILLDUST and Teed came out to the Shoto boys' camp late that afternoon. Stilldust introduced Teed to the boys and told them his position with the railroad. Teed shook hands with every one of them very respectfully, wonder growing in his face. He gripped Shay's hand a little tighter—held a little longer, and grinned as Shay grinned.

"That's the baby of the family, Harry," Stilldust explained. "He's the one that touched off this whole keg of dynamite, and," concluded Stilldust, "threw the keg right where it would do the most damage."

"Shoto luck," said Shay, grinning wider. Two days ago if anybody had said that in his hearing he would have knocked them down.

"Whatever kind it is," said Teed, "I sure wouldn't mind owning some of the same brand. I'll see that you boys are properly rewarded for the part you've played in this. You may not be aware of it, but you've saved this railroad a cool hundred thousand in cash and God knows how much in future trouble. We've been trying to put the hammer on Fireman Turk for more than ten years."

"Shucks," said Shay, looking at Stilldust. "Turk ain't tough. Here's a feller I sure don't want to *ever* lock horns with."

Stilldust almost blushed. "Shay, that's about the biggest compliment I ever had paid me," he said. "Thank you. Let's go, Harry. I see your engineer has got your car ready."

Shay was restless after supper. He kept looking toward Big Sink.

Sam said, "You might as well set down, Shay. We promised Pa we'd keep you out of trouble and we aim to do it if we have to set up shifts with you. You'll not sneak out tonight and go bustin' up the whole town."

Shay said crossly, "What do you expect me to do when I'm jumped—lay down and roll over? Anyway you heard what that big, high muckity-muck said, didn't you?"

"That's all done and over," replied Sam. "You can't expect to save a railroad every night—"

Unexpectedly Sol spoke up in Shay's defense.

"Let him go, Sam. It's that girl, and she's all right. I asked Paddy about her. That's her Pa that runs the place and it's plumb respectable now—at least to what it used to be."

Sam looked uncertain. "It ain't the girl," he said. "She *is* all right. I don't have to have anybody tell me that. But," he told Shay sternly, "if we have to come after you again, it'll be the *last* time."

Shay was already out of earshot and picking up speed. Sam stared after him thoughtfully.

"Anyhow," he reasoned, "I don't figure he can do *much* damage with only one good arm."

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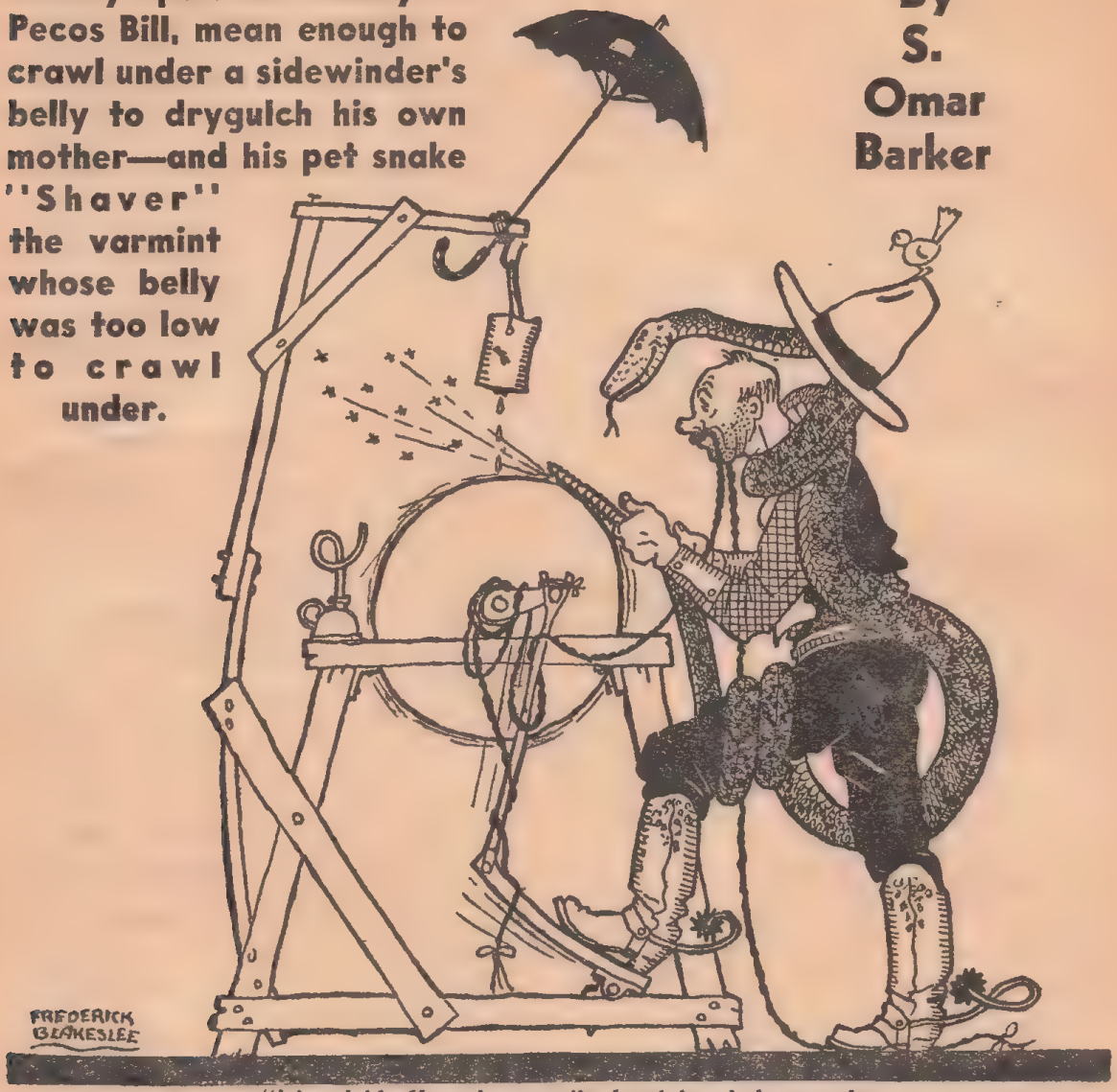
Rattler's Romance

Boosty spins the windy of Pecos Bill, mean enough to crawl under a sidewinder's belly to drygulch his own mother—and his pet snake "Shaver" the varmint whose belly was too low to crawl under.

By S. Omar Barker



"I jest laid off my beavertail whettin' and sharpened that ol' diamond-back's rear end fer him."

"I SEE by the noospaper," said Biff Wilkins in his best savvy-mucho voice, "where the ever-advancin' foot of science is wunst more peerin' through the penumbra of iggerunce surroundin' the tauntalizin' tabloo of mystery enshroudin' the question of prehistoric zoo-ology by scalin' the persippitus precipice of Shiva's Temple."

"Shiva's Temple?" inquired Banty McGinnis. "Ain't that the place up in Utah where them Mormons goes to swap wives?"

"No, it ain't. It's—"

"Mormons don't swap wives nohow," busted in Bran Mash Mullens. "I rode the range with a Mormon cowpoke wunst, what told me they don't even believe in a pleurasy of wives no more, now they got the country purty well propagated. He said—"

"Poppy-lated, you mean," corrected Biff Wilkins learnedly. "But this

"Shiva's Temple ain't no church, Mormon nor otherwise. It's a—"

"My uncle clumb up on a church wunst down in Texas," offered the new hand named Lufe, "but they wasn't no prehistoric mystery about it. What he clumb up there for, was some rattlesnakes made their nest up there, an' ever' time a back-row deacon stepped outside to—to kinder relieve hisself of what chaw juice he couldn't swaller, why like as not a snake egg would roll off'n the roof onto his head an'—"

"Rattlesnakes don't lay eggs," contended Bran Mash Mullens. "It's the scritch owl eggs they swaller that hatches into little snakes. It's the shells caught on their tails that makes the rattles. I knowed a feller had a pet rattler wunst, an' he told me—"

"Pet rattler my Aunt Judy!" snorted Biff Wilkins. "You can't no more tame a rattler than you can sweeten vinegar with alum. Now this here Shiva's Temple I'm speakin' of, it's a—"

"Ixcuse my interloodin' at this p'int," drawled Mr. Embustero (Boosty for short) Peckleberry, pausing in the process of seeing how many laps of hoss-tail moustache he could wrap around the end of his nose without sneezing, "but speakin' of tamin' rattlers, you git right down to taw, an' snakes ain't no different frum wimmen, wildcats or other varmints. Ever' one of 'em, somewheres in the deeps of their ornery souls, nourishes a hidden hanker, or a secrit longin' for something that'll make 'em diffrint frum the rest of their tribe. All you got to do, you got to discover that there hidden hanker, satisfy it for 'em, an' you've got 'em tamed.

"You take my Aunt Lizzymaybelle: Uncle Skootch like to never got her gentled till it dawned on him one day that she harbored a hidden hanker to be the only woman in Cheap John County ever to git spanked with the flat side of a shovel, an' after that she was so tame he ackshully had to push her off'n his lap ever' time he wanted to curry a hawg.

"You see he'd kinder located her weak spot, you might say, same as I done with this here rattlesnake I'm tellin' you about. I'd always hankered fer a pet rattlesnake, 'specially after old Pecos Bill begun spreadin' the rumor around what a sissy I was fer wearin' a plain ol' bullsnake instid of a rattler fer a hatband. So when this here eight foot rattler begun hangin' around my grindstone, battin' his eyes so kinder wishful, natcherly I—"

"Snakes don't bat their eyes," busted in Bran Mash again, "because they ain't got no lids."

"I don't see no lid to your mouth neither, but I notice you battin' it right smart. By the way, Biff, did them sons of science find any rattlesnakes up on that there Shaver's Temper?"

"Shiva's Temple, you mean? Yeah, one. Seems like they find a mighty funny snake up there, with rattles slopin' to a p'int like an arrer head an' plumb saw-toothed on the sides. It says—"

"What the goots is this here Shiva's Temple anyways?" queried Banty McGinnis. "A new fangled donnicker or what?"

"Quit interlumpin' me an' I'll exparagate yer iggerunce," said Biff. "If I ain't misinduculated, them Hoppy Injuns out in Arizona calls the ramrod of their snake gods by the name of 'Shiva.' So here's this geograffical wart protuberatin' up outa the Grand Canyon, more'n a mile high an' so steep that it ain't never been clumb by man nor beast since the Colorado River gnawed it off frum the mainland some 20,000 years ago. So they call it 'Shiva's Temple.' But last week a couple of them inturpid scientists managed to climb up on it an' now they're explorogatin' them two, three hundred acres of juniper an' cactus mesa in hopes of seein'

what they can find. Will they discover a Lost World of ancient animal life unhaltered since the ravidgin' waters severed this island of the sky frum the mainland? Will the penematrate the penumbra of mystery enshroudin' the—"

"What the hell's a penoombra?" bust in Bran Mash again.

"It's a prehisteeric monsterosity," offered Banty McGinnis, "resemblin' a cross between a horny toad, a Heely monster, three lizzerds, a rhinocerhoss, two hipperpotmasusses, a gillygaloo bird, a sidehill hodag, a skun jassack an' eighty-three tons of crookid neck squash. It's a—"

"What's got them scientists fightin' their heads," went on Biff Wilkins, "is how come this one rattlesnake is up there when this here mesa has been plumb cut off frum the world fer 20,000 years. An' even more of a mystery is how come him sharp tailed thataway."

THEY'S a heap of things mysteries to them sissified sons of science (said old Boosty, letting in to plait the Peckleberry hosstails into a pair of braids that would hogtie an elephant). That's because they git their iggerunce outa books instid of gittin' out where the owls sing bass an' livin' life with the hair on like us ol' rannymagoots that come west when the rabbits had long tails.

Lemme see, that was the year ol' Pecos Bill turned his meanness on the cattlemen an' purt near ruint 'em. Ol' Pecos could think up the meanest methods of makin' the cowmen trouble. He was so pizen mean that the Heely monsters helt a sit-down strike, claimin' any feller that sweat pure sticknine was plumb unfair to the pizen industry. So when he took it into his knotty noggin to kinder imbarriss the beef bizness, he shore did raise hell.

What he done, he pertended he'd quit his evil ways an' sent word to old Andy Jackson, who was ramroddin' the country at that time, to send him out a couple hunderd thousand of them there Tennessee hoop snakes, an' he'd help the pioneerin' problem by replacin' the wore out tires of immigrunt waggins with 'em. Well, you know how Old Hickory was—trust anybody that spit the same color terbaccer juice that he did, so he sent these snakes out to Pecos Bill with the govmint's compliments. But Pecos never made no waggin tires out of 'em.

'Course you know a hoop snake ain't natcherly the shape of a hoop. They git that way by grabbin' the end of their tail in their mouth. How come they kin reach their own tails with their teeth, the ends of their tails is kinder flinty an' sharp like a spear, so when they take a notion to metamorfagate theirselves into a hoop, they back up to a tree an' anker their tail in to hold it stiff whilst they reach around an' grab it between their teeth, then yank it a-loose from the log an' go hoop-rollin' around the country lookin' for a cow to suck. Some calls 'em milk snakes jest on that account.

Well sir, believe it or spit aginst the wind, what ol' Pecos Bill done, whilst them snakes was restin' from their long trip out frum Tennesee, he come crawlin' up behind 'em, one at a time an' hollered "boo" an' it spooked 'em to where they socked their tails at what they taken fer an ol' holler stump so as to turn theirselves into hoops an' roll away frum there. But it wasn't no stump, it was Pecos Bill's beezer, which was so tough an' callused frum pokin' it into other folks's bizness that it bent the point on ever' dang one of them hoop-snakes' tails plumb into the shape of a fish hook.

Quick as Pecos got all them snakes' *colas* bent, he throwed a couple hunderd of 'em acrost his shoulder, got on his ol' saddle grizzly an' lit out

lookin' fer cattle. Quick as he'd see an ol' cow with a calf he'd lope alongside an' hook the tail of one of them snakes into the hide of her back up along close to the shoulders an' go on to the next 'un.

First thing us cattlemen knowed some two hunderd thousand head of wet cows had great long ol' limber snakes stretched out sunnin' theirselves along the top of their backs. 'Course it looked kinder unusual, but unusual things ain't nothin' unusual in the West, an' we never paid no mind to it till the calves began to die off.

By the way, I reckon you've all see a heap of line-back cows, an' like as not wondered how come that white streak down their back. Well, there ain't no penoombra of mystery about it: the hair natcherly faded out white where them snakes laid an' started the breed.

Gents, them hook snakes got so fat an' sassy they'd lay up there with their heads between an ol' cow's hips an' make faces at the rattlesnakes till they had ever' diamond-back in the country as mean tempered as a stump-tailed bull shut up in a steer pasture in fly time.

Well, it didn't take no son of science to figger out what was killin' the calves. No, it warn't the rattlesnakes, it was pure starvation. Yessir, them hook snakes was so long an' limber that they was swingin' down an' suckin' them cows, jest like ol' Pecos had figgered they would.

Yessir, that hombre wasn't only as mean as an old maid with the toothache, he was also smart. He sure had us cowmen where the hair was short till finely I sent fer ol' Kit Carson to bring me some dried beaver tails. If you never seen a beaver tail, it's kinder flat an' flinty an' purty heavy for its weight. So I borried me a grindstone frum an ol' squatter that didn't have no more use for it since he was lettin' his toenails grow anyways, an' begun grindin' a razor edge onto them beaver tails. An' quick as I'd git 'em sharpened, the cowboys would take 'em an' fasten 'em onto the tails of these snake-infestered cows. So when one of them dang hook snakes would swing down to start gittin' him some na-na, the ol' cow would switch her tail' an' snick his head off.

Main trouble was, it was hard to git them beaver tails tied on straight, an' about four out of five of them ol' cows would miss the snake an' chop off her own leg. Then the cowboys would have to ketch her an' saw the other three off to match before she could git around to grass. That wouldn't of been nothin' much to fret over, but them stump-legged cows' udders hung so low the calves couldn't knuckle down to 'em till we sawed their legs off too, to where I begun to worry about startin' sech a short-legged breed you couldn't drive 'em up the trail to market.

IT WAS whilst I was whirlin' the ol' grindstone one day, whettin' up them beaver tails an' studyin' over the possibilities of furnishin' them stumpies with roller skates, that I first noticed this ol' rattler hangin' around. He was an elegant ol' cuss, as long as a Mexkin holiday an' big around as a tree limb, but he sure did look mighty anxious about somethin', backin' an' fillin' around there like a cowboy courtin' an old maid can't-whistle.

Purty soon an ol' cow come wanderin' by an' the sassy ol' hook snake on her back begun makin' faces at this rattler, to where I thought the rattler would come plumb unshucked. He'd buzz them twenty-seven rattles of his till the vibration shelled a nester's beans outa the pods eight mile away. Then he'd kinder accumulate hisself into a coil an' strike with all the wim an' wigor of a shotgun bridegroom tryin' to beat his pappy-in-law to the county line. But ever time he struck.

that ol' hook snake would duck, an' the wigor of this rattler's strike would carry him plumb over the cow's back an' the hooksnake would begin makin' faces at him agin.

Boys, if there ever was a plumb discouraged rattlesnake that 'un was it, an' to make it worse ol' Pecos Bill come by an' begun jeerin' at him.

"What's the matter, Oliver?" he inquires. "Ain't you digested them clock springs yit?"

It seems ol' Pecos had been experimentin' with rattlers, feedin' 'em alarm clocks to develop a breed that would ring bells when they rattled, an' it was the clock springs inside this ol' diamond back that was makin' him overshoot everwhen he struck. You take a man that's cruel like that to a humble an' innercent rattlesnake, an' he's mean enough to suck eggs an' spit in the shells.

"Pecos," I says, "you've done played enough hell around here without teasin' this little ol' helpless snake! Git to hell outa here before I kick your tailend so hard you'll have to build you a ladder to comb your own hair!"

"You an' how many other jassacks?" sneers Pecos. "Oliver's my snake, an' I've come to git him!"

Sayin' which he starts after this ol' rattler, an' the rattler comes runnin' to me for pertection, an' I grab him right behind the ears an' start whippin' ol' Pecos acrost the face with him, which riles him to where he grabs a couple of stiff-tailed wolves out of the holsters an' comes at me with 'em, one in each hand. I'd learnt long ago that the best way to fight a man like that is to run like hell, so's to git him to chase you an' maybe he'll step in a badger hole an' bust a leg, an' then you got him.

Well, when I come amblin' back a couple days later, havin' tolled ol' Pecos into a bog an' left him there, here was that ol' diamond back rattler workin' away at my grindstone as earnest as a stump tail bull fightin' the heel flies—an' doin' jest about as much good.

He didn't see me comin' so I stopped to watch him. What he'd do, gents, he'd lap hisself around an' around that grindstone like a tenderfoot takin' his dallies, then he'd strike out an' unwind hisself, which would whirl the wheel, an' quick as he could recover his momentum, he'd slither back to it, hind end to, an' slap the end of his tail up on the grindstone.

It was as plain as the gravy tracks on a preacher's vest what he was tryin' to do: yessir, he'd ondoubtless observed me whettin' them beaver tails, an' he was tryin' to sharpen hisn the same way. Y'see, I'd discovert this diamond back's suppressed desire, hidden hanker or whatever you want to call it. For reasons unbeknownst to me at the time, he wanted him a sharpened tail. But he wasn't makin' much headway—maybe I ort to say tailway—at it, for the grindstone would jest about stop turnin' by the time he'd git backed up to it.

Well sir, it brung the salt water to my eyes to see what a simple little thing it would take to make that pore rattler happy, so I jest laid off my beavertail whettin' fer a few days and sharpened that ol' diamond-back's rear end fer him. Quick as he seen I aimed to help him he backed right up to it as willin' as a itchy hawg to a cuckleburr brush. He took my handlin' as docile as a dude in a barber chair, an' I sure put a good edge on him. I not only whetted the rearmost rattle as sharp as a saddlemaker's awl, but I likewise ground a fancy razor edge onto the sides of all his twenty-seven rattles.

Y'know that snake was so grateful when I got through whettin' him that I had to climb a tree to keep him frum wroppin' hisself around my neck an' kissin' me.

Jest then a cow with one of ol' Pecos Bill's milk-thieves on her back

come wanderin' by, an' this hook snake begun to tauntalize him.

Then it became evident how come my rattler had wanted his tail sharpened, for this time, before he struck, he socked his spike into the ground for an anchor, an' it helt him down frum overshootin', to where he smacked his fangs into his tauntalizer right behind the ears and hung on. 'Course the old cow spooked an' run, an my rattler snapped the hook snake's head off like a bootheel in a b'ar trap.

Then he hoisted anchor, waved goodbye to me an' slithered off down the draw as happy as a toad full of minnie bugs.

I CLUMB back down out of the tree an' begun studyin' over the problim of some way to balance them beaver tail knives on the cows' tails so they wouldn't so many of 'em chop their legs off when they switched. The way it was workin' out, seem like even if us cattlemen did succeed in beheadin' all them hook snakes, still ol' Pecos Bill was gittin' the best of us, leavin' us with so many thousand stump-legged cattle thataway. Seem to me like if there was jest some method of borin' a hole through them beaver tails endways so we could thread 'em onto the cows' tails straight, we'd have ol' Pecos bested. But the inside of a cured beaver tail is as flinty as froze tiger spit, an' it taken one man with two cowboys to grunt fer him purt near a week jest to augur out one tail.

Much as I'd hankered fer a pet rattlesnake, studyin' on this problim made me fergit this ol' eight-footer as slick as a greasy biskit.

Next mornin' I woke up to a tinklin' tune that sounded like some ol' gal backed up to a buzz saw with a tin bustle on. Y'see them alarm clocks ol' Pecos had fed this snake was now beginnin' to take effect on his rattlin' an' he was so proud of it that he'd woke me up to hear it. I'd figgered my cabin was snake tight, but this ol' buzzer had jest backed up to it an' bored him out a hole with his auger-bitted tail, an' there he was with a brush of soapweed root in his mouth, latherin' up my face fer the mornin's shave. Boys, fer a plumb fancy shave there ain't nothin' compares with the gentle waggin' of a whetted snake's tail over yer jowls—unless maybe it would be a couple of ol' Paul Bunyan's lumberjacks with a crosscut saw.

Ol' Pecos had named this snake "Oliver" because he was always gittin' loose an' runnin' oliver the country, but after the barberin' he gave me that mornin' I promply christianed him "Shaver."

Well, there I set, playin' the coffee pot an' worryin' about the problim of them beaver tails, when all of a sudden I noticed ol' Shaver was gone. Boys, there ain't no doubts about it: snakes is plumb sykick. I mean they kin jest look at a feller an' tell what he's got on his mind besides dandruff. Because purty soon I heard a peculimer grindin' noise an' when I stepped outside, there was ol' Shaver borin' holes through them beaver tails, end to end, jest like I wanted. It'd been a turble problim to me, but it was as simple as kissin' a widder to that snake.

He'd jest coil up, set the sharp point of his tail into the gristle end of a beaver tail, an' when he uncoiled, it started them sharp edged rattles of his whirlin' like an auger, to where they bored a neat round hole quicker'n a deacon kin say dammit. All I had to do that mornin' was to stand by to slush a little jaw juice on his auger to keep it cool, an' when the cowboys come at noon I had eighteen wagon loads of beaver tails all ready for 'em.

Y'see with that endways hole, all the boys had to do was thread a cow's tail through it, tie a knot in the end

so it wouldn't slip off, an' she had her a snake choppin' instrumint that hung true as a taw line an' no danger of cuttin' her leg off when she swung it.

In less'n a week there wasn't a head left on any milk-sucklin' snake in the country, an' we had ol' Pecos Bill whipped at his own game—all because I'd reconnized this rattlesnake's hidden hanker for a tail-whettin'.

NATCHERLY ol' Pecos Bill didn't take no sech defeat layin' down. He organized him a posse of razorback hawgs an' come after ol' Shaver jest a faunchin'. Y'know there ain't nothin' like an Arkansaw hawg to slaughter rattlesnakes with.

Any hawg is mighty hard to pizen, but the veins of them porcine sons of Arkinsaw is so puckered up from eatin' green persimmons that there ain't no room fer pizen to squirkulate. Most dumb animals, includin' cowboys, it's one strike frum a rattle an' you're out, but them razorbacks, a snake has got to jest keep hammerin' away at 'em, an' sooner or later one of 'em will hump up an' slash his head off.

But this time me an' ol' Shaver fooled 'em. Instid of strikin' at 'em with his fangs, I helt ol' Shaver's head fer him an' let him meet the attack with his razor-bit tail. Believe it or die doubtful, ol' Shaver shaved the bristles off of every one of them hawgs so swift an' smooth that in two minutes the whole ninety-one of 'em was quealin' an' squawnkin' fer home. What say? Why, shore, a hawg ain't got no courage without his bristles. You ever see a hawg offer fight without he bristled up first?

I reckon Pecos Bill knowed when he was whupped, for there was a right smart spell after that when he plumb quit pesterin' us.

Ah, them was the happiest days of my life, gents, blessed by the love an' affection of my ol' pet diamondback. Believe it or try matrimony, boys, the man that ain't never knowed the trustin' devotions of a rattlesnake, he's missed one of the sweetest experiences outside the sugar sack.

You take a wife, an' be she ever so docile, still there'll be times when she'll git pepper on her tongue in spite o' hell, but an ol' rattler jest keeps quiet. You take a dog, an' if you shut him outside he'll keep you awake all night scratchin' at the door, an' if you let him in you'll keep yourself awake scratchin' at the fleas. You take a pet jassack an' he may be so sweet that his nose drips honey, but sooner or later he'll kick the hell out of you. Pet skunks is mighty nice, an' pet porkypines has their points, but you always got to be so damn polite to 'em. But an ol' rattlesnake, he shore is a comfort to have around. That is, he was till ol' Pecos Bill finagled him into fallin' in love.

That ol' whooza-ma-goog never fergot a grudge, an' it didn't soothe him none that me an' ol' Shaver was beatin' him out of a heap of business. He'd always made a heap of money gatherin' up the hollers out of holler logs an' sellin' 'em to the nesters fer postholes, but with that auger-bit tail of his, ol' Shaver could posthole a fence line before ol' Pecos could even git a sack of postholes unloaded off the wagin, much less socked into the ground.

An' when the railroad come through ol' Pecos tried to hire out his herd of swivel-nosed groundhawgs to root out their tunnels fer 'em but I underbid him, because ol' Shaver had now growed to a size where he could back up to a mountain an' auger a railroad tunnel through it like a tornado tearin' itself through Kansas.

An' still the end button on his tail helt such a fine razor edge an' he stayed so sweet an' gentle that the old maid schoolmarm over on Timble-Bug Crick used to come over once

a week to git my snake to shave the whiskers off'n her wart.

Then Pecos Bill ruint it all by sendin' over a little ol' she-scritch owl to make goo-goo eyes at him. Seem like it plumb unshucked him, because instid of returnin' his affections, this here flouncy little ol' she-owl jest taken delight in tauntalizin' him. She was one of them burrowin' scritch-owls with a swivel neck that would whirl around sixty-nine times with one windin'. I reckon that's how come ol' Shaver to git to admirin' her—seein' she could burrow out a hole with that auger-twist head of hers, purt near as good as he could hisself.

WELL, to make a long story short, she popped out of a prairie dog hole one day an' begun teasin' ol' Shaver, an' like a dang fool he fell fer it, an' when he come wigglin' up to sorter court her a little, she give a scritch, hopped up about thirty foot in the air, dove head first to the ground an' went to burrowin'. Before I could stop him, ol' Shaver backed up, socked his auger into the hole where she'd disappeared an' begun borin' after her.

Trouble was her tunnelin' wasn't big enough fer him an' he had to ream it out fifteen, twenty foot bigger in diameter so he could foller her. Natcherly, with that handicap, he never could ketch her, an' it shore put him in a bad temper. He'd come home after chasin' that she-owl through the vowels of the earth for a week, buzzin' them alarm clock rattles of his so loud in the furies of his unrequited passion that it busted ear-drums plumb back in Arkysaw—what few wasn't too packed with dust. Gents, he shore did develop him a temper. An' the way he got to underminin' the country burrowin' after that little ol' fibberty-gibbit it was plumb terrible.

Finely I realized I was goin' to have to saw off his auger for him or the whole country would begin cavin' in, but he must of read my mind, for after that he never come back.

What say? No, he never did persuade that little lady scritch owl to mate up with him. After waitin' all winter I set out to look fer him, an' I soon discovered that this here underground race of love was headin' west, because I come onto great big ol' holes down around Santa Rosa where that pore love-smote snake had come up fer air. You can see them holes around there plumb till yit.

Then ol' Kit Carson come along with reports that them Hoppy Injuns out in Arimazona, which had always been as whiskery as a red-tailed wolf, was claimin' that a monsterous big snake-god had come wigglin' outa the deeps of the earth with a razor on the end of his tail an' shaved ever last one of 'em plumb smooth as an ordinary snake's belly.

Natcherly I knowed right away that these here Injuns' "Snake-God" was ol' Shaver, so I whipped my bang-tailed mule right out to Arimazona to see about it. Near as I could learn, my tunnel-borin' snake had popped up in this Hoppy Injun Pueblo, seen the owl feathers them Hoppies wore in their whiskers, an' let in to shave ever damn one of 'em to see if they wasn't hidin' that little she-owl.

But they wasn't. I seen what taken place out there at the Grand Canyon with my own eyes, and it wasn't no 20,000 years ago neither. Not a day over a hundred as the crow flies, an' it wasn't water that gnawed off that there island in the sky you been readin' about neither.

Y'see, this tauntalizin' little scritch owl got to dodgin' around, yoo-hooin' at him frum way down in the Grand Canyon, an' the echoes natcherly druve ol' Shaver loco. Yessir, love-sick like he was, all that pore ol'

snake knowed to do was to sock his auger into the earth an' drill down to where he heard the last echo, an' as them echoes kinder travelled round an' around, first thing you know, he'd bored so many mile-deep holes right around in purt near a circle that the earth caved off into the river an' left him stranded up on top of this here island of the sky that these scientist fellers has jest recently clumb. In the deeps of their iggerunce they miscall it "Shiva's Temple." But it ain't "Shiva's Temple," it's "Shaver's Temper," an' that spike-tailed rattlesnake them scientists found up there cain't be none other than old Shaver hisself.

Pore ol' Shaver, hermitizin' up there all these years, not even heart enough left in him to auger his way back to the mainland! An' all on account of his noble an' unrequited passion fer a dang little ol' borrowin' scritch owl that had led him on an' on, only to bust his heart at last by elopin' with a prairie dog!

What say? Well, supposin' this auger-tailed rattler them scientists found *ain't* but about a yard long—he's had plenty of time to swhivel, ain't he?

SILVER BELL

Even Dr. Botts' Blister Salve wouldn't cure the ills of Silver Bell — until the sage sawbone's embryonic interne, Red Sutter, performed a major operation — on himself!

"Stop where you are, gentlemen," Dr. Botts said, "or I'll blast you out of this room."

CHAPTER I
"I Wilt"

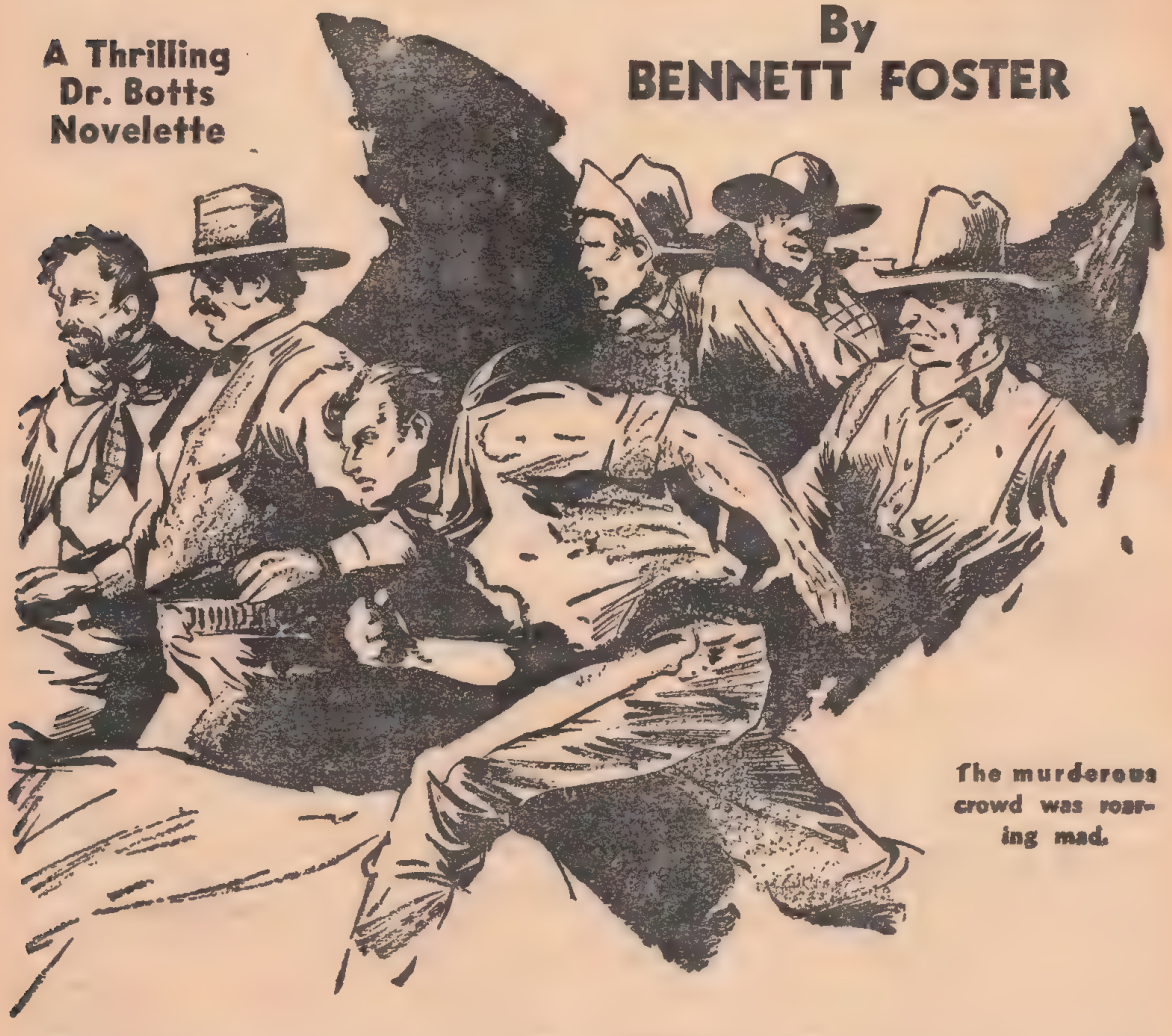
DR. ARCHIMEDES COPERNICUS BOTTS scanned the horizon with bright blue eyes. Beside him Red Sutter slept on the wagon seat, and in front of him Stomach and Bowels, his team of little mules, trotted manfully, their sharp feet pattering in the dust. Red dozed, the mules trotted, the wagon rattled as did the bottles of Botts' Universal Elixir and Solvent, and Dr. Botts looked for food.

There was plenty of food stowed away in the chuck box in the wagon, and there were pots, pans and an ax to cut wood. Wood lined the road they followed, a deep rutted, twisting road. Indeed all the wherewithal for a

TAKES THE CURE

A Thrilling Dr. Botts Novelette

By BENNETT FOSTER



The murderous crowd was roaring mad.

wonderful meal was in that red, black and gilt wagon, for Dr. Botts himself was a cook par-excellent. Still, the doctor peered ahead, looking for a town. Food or no food, wood or no wood, culinary skill or none, Dr. Botts would not pause to assuage his hunger for—and here was the rub—Dr. Botts hired Red Sutter and therefore Red Sutter should do the menial tasks such as cooking. And in cooking, Red's accomplishments were limited to fried rabbit, fried sow bosom, corn bread, and coffee that would float a railroad spike.

"Wake up, Amok," said Dr. Botts. "There's smoke ahead. Town coming. Time for you to get dressed."

With a sigh, a yawn and a grunt, Amok, the erstwhile Red Sutter, bestirred himself. Dolefully he pulled a blanket about his brown stained shoulders. Dolefully he assumed a wig, the black braid of which hung down and scratched his back, and still more dolefully he pulled on a pair of dilapidated Sioux moccasins. It was Red Sutter's role in life to impersonate a Maori. Neither Red nor Dr. Botts had ever seen a Maori, but Red was dressed as they imagined one might look. Completing his toilet by tucking a heavy, short barreled Colt into the gee string he wore in lieu of trousers, Red voiced his habitual complaint.

"When you goin' to let me dress like a human, Doc?"

"When you can cook like one!" snapped Dr. Botts.

The mules and the wagon debouched from the little hills and rolled toward the flats. There was a town on the flats, a thing of shacks and tents and hastily assembled structures that were both shack and tent. Camps were pitched along the little stream and Dr. Botts could see tom rockers and piles of rock thrown out by the placer miners in the course of their operations. Figuratively, Dr. Botts rubbed his plump white hands together. Here, within sight, almost within sound, was easy picking. Here was wealth in the raw and whenever Dr. Botts saw wealth, raw or not, he believed that he could get his hands upon some of it.

"Gold camp," said Dr. Botts.

Red yawned.

The equipage reached the straggling street of the town, was expertly turned and brought to a halt close beside a large board and canvas building. Helen of Troy, the doctor's racing mare, bumped her nose into the tail gate of the wagon and being so appraised of the halt, stopped and went to sleep again. Helen, ewe-necked, pigeontoed and looking like sin covered by horsehide, could run half a mile within a fifth of a second of the world's record time and on occasion earned the doctor her keep.

Dr. Botts, climbing over the wagon wheel, waved his hand and babbled a senseless jargon to Red. At one time he had tried to teach Red to speak Pig Latin but had given that up. Now he chattered gibberish and Red phlegmatically went about the routine of making camp. Red unhooked the mules, untied Helen, and led mules and mare away toward a trough. Dr. Botts, putting his plump person to rights, gathered the tails of his Prince Albert coat about him, adjusted his tall beaver hat, and unerringly headed toward food. As he walked he glanced back at his wagon. It was his pride and joy and also his livelihood. Displayed on the side of the wagon was a sign extolling some of the doctor's talents.

DR. A. C. BOTTS
Botts' Universal Elixir and Solvent
Botts' Balsam Balm
Botts' Boluses
"The Friend of Man and Beast"
Teeth extracted . . . Horses medicated
. . . Wells witched

The sign said nothing of the doctor's artistry at sleight of hand, his ability as a ventriloquist, or that he could shoot like a devil with the 32-20 he wore beneath his coat tails.

Dr. Botts mounted the steps of a frame building, pushed open the door and entered a place of delight. Odors assailed him. The smell of fried ham billowed from the kitchen, and fresh eggs sent their sublime perfume with the ham. Something gave off a spicy odor and above it all, blending the whole as it were, came the smell of coffee, real coffee, amber colored, strong as a strong man's arms and sweet as a woman's love.

"Ah!" breathed Dr. Botts, nose twitching.

He seated himself at the table, glanced around, and hearing the owner of this delightful place approaching, swiveled in his chair and looked toward the kitchen. In the door stood an Amazon; a giant flaxen haired woman with a face that was carved from solid granite.

"Oh!" said Dr. Botts, and almost added, "My!"

"Dost thee desire food?" lisped the big woman. If an eagle had cooed Dr. Botts could have been no more startled. "Wilt thee have ham and eggs and coffee with coffee cake?"

Stunned, Dr. Botts replied, "I wilt."

THE woman went away to return again with a glass of water and sundry tools for eating. Dr. Botts

could hear the ham frying and the eggs crackling. Plainly the gentle Amazon had a helper in the kitchen. Presently that helper appeared: a man as big as the woman, with as hard a face, and with a shining bald head that tapered to a peak. Man and woman waited silently upon the doctor, placing the food and the drink about his elbows. Dr. Botts cut into tender ham, sopped the red and brown morsel in delectable yellow juice from the eggs, engulfed it, and sighed his happiness.

"Dost thee find it satisfactory?" rumbled the bald headed man.

With his mouth full Dr. Botts nodded.

Red Sutter's troubled face appeared in the doorway. Red was dumb, how dumb Dr. Botts was never certain. Red could be depended upon to learn only one thing at a time and he could also be depended upon to do that thing at the wrong time. Still, who was Dr. Botts to withhold such bliss even from Red Sutter? He waved his hand toward the table, inviting Red. To the cook and the waitress he spoke.

"Another helping for my assistant," he ordered. "Amok is a Maori and speaks no English, but he can eat ham and eggs."

"Injun?" questioned the big man, dull eyes sharpening.

"A Maori," corrected Dr. Botts.

The bald headed man said, "Oh," and padded away to the kitchen. The woman had already departed for water and more eating equipment. Red sat down and looked at Dr. Botts.

"There's grief acomin'," Red hissed.

"Nonsense," grunted Dr. Botts. "There's ham and eggs coming. And such ham and eggs!"

He returned to the attack. Red Sutter looked moody.

His expression brightened when his own food was placed before him and he had taken a bite or two. Red liked rabbit, bowl gravy, and cornbread, but he could also tolerate ham and eggs. He ate with the least possible waste of effort, using either knife or fork, whichever came handiest to the morsel of food he desired.

Both men were well along into their meal and Dr. Botts was contemplating the advisability of a second order when their peace was disturbed. The door opened once more and a black-bearded, black-haired man with a body like a barrel, crowded into the room. The newcomer made directly toward the bald proprietor and his wife, and they retreated before him. As the trio went into the kitchen, Dr. Botts looked at Red. Red looked at the ham and eggs.

"I could use another snack of these here," said Red.

The good doctor made no answer. He was listening attentively, trying to hear what was going on in the kitchen. Rising above the rumble of altercation, Dr. Botts heard a heavy voice.

"You have that money ready for me in the mornin'. If you don't..."

A command and a threat were given here. Dr. Botts was alert. He had not liked that Black Beard's appearance.

"An' I'll bring them clothes over to have 'em washed." Black Beard was evidently making arrangements concerning his laundry. He came out of the kitchen, looked back over his shoulder, and with a glance at Dr. Botts and Red Sutter, went out, slamming the door.

FIVE minutes after the bearded man's departure the blond Amazon and her husband came from the kitchen. Dr. Botts now had finished his meal and at last Red had given up. The two, man and woman, approached the table as Dr. Botts got up and felt in his pocket. Dr. Botts was in funds.

"How much?" questioned the doctor.

"Would . . . would thee pay a dollar?" asked the bald man hesitantly.

"I would," agreed Dr. Botts. "A dollar apiece?"

Husband and wife looked at each other again, then suddenly the bald man nodded again. "A dollar each," he said. "I would not charge thee so much, but we woefully need the money and then thy friend is an injun."

"Maori," corrected Dr. Botts. "Here's your money."

With Red beside him he left the restaurant and walked up the street. Dr. Botts felt expansive. He would, in this mellow mood, buy Red a drink, and accordingly the two entered the first saloon which was the board and canvas affair close beside the wagon. At the bar, waiting for service, Dr. Botts sized up the place. Boards made the walls for a distance of about four feet. Above that, canvas slapped. Saloon, honky tonk and dance hall, so Dr. Botts classified the spot. He was an expert on such classification. A curled whiskered bartender approached and from him Dr. Botts ordered whiskey for himself and Red.

When they had been served the bartender leaned forward and spoke familiarly. "New in town?"

"We just arrived."

"What's that?" The bartender jerked his head toward Red Sutter.

"A Maori. I myself brought him from his native haunts in the South Seas." Dr. Botts' voiced assumed the roll of the practiced pitch artist. "He is a man eater, a cannibal, and speaks no English. If you witness my performance tonight, friend, you will see him do the blood dance of the Maoris, a blood curdling savage sight that will make your hair stand on end and furthermore . . ."

"He drinks whiskey like a white man," interrupted the bartender. "Is that yore wagon outside?"

"It is."

The bartender leaned further forward. "You'll need a night watchman," he announced. "This here Silver Bell is a bad town. Got to watch yore property. I'll send you a man."

"Don't trouble yourself." The doctor did not like the whisky and his voice was sharp. "We'll look after our property."

The bartender grunted and put the bar bottle out of Red's reach. Dr. Botts paid for the drinks and the two went out.

There was not a great deal of interest in Silver Bell. The town was a placer camp, rich enough if the stores and saloons told the truth, but like a hundred other placer camps that lay behind Dr. Archimedes Copernicus Botts. He and Red strolled the street and as the sun went down, returned to the wagon and prepared for business. The kerosene flares were lighted, the platform rigged at the end of the wagon, and while the livestock contentedly munched grain in their corrals, Dr. Botts climbed up on the platform, got out his banjo and whacked it to life.

Under the influence of the banjo a little crowd formed. Dr. Botts, abstaining from card tricks, told a few stories, performed some sleight of hand, played for Red to do the blood dance, and then extolled the virtues of Botts' Balsam Balm, Botts' Boluses, and Botts' Universal Elixir and Solvent. He sold a little, not much, and presently the crowd drifted away. When they had departed and before Dr. Botts could again renew his performance, the black bearded man appeared below the platform.

"Gus Arkind, over to the saloon, said you wanted a night watchman," announced Black Beard. "I'm Blackie Bond. I'll git you a man."

"Your friend Gus was misinformed," said Dr. Botts. "I don't need a watchman."

Bond's beard split in a grin. "That's what you think," he said. "It'll cost you ten dollars a night, an' it's a good investment."

Dr. Botts played idle chords upon

the banjo. "I don't need a watchman," he repeated, eyeing Bond. There was something at the bottom of this. Dr. Botts did not know just what.

Bond shrugged. "All right," he said, and turning, walked away. Dr. Botts began his spiel again.

Late that night when the crowd failed to respond longer to Dr. Botts' dulcet wheedling, the Medicine Show closed up. Dr. Botts put out the flares. Red saw to the mules and to Helen, and the two men prepared for bed.

"Not much of a place," said Dr. Botts as they turned in on the bunks in the wagon. "We didn't make fifteen dollars. Keep an ear open, Red. We might hear something tonight."

Red yawned, stretched, and pulled up the blankets. Dr. Botts blew out the lantern.

CHAPTER II
Paying Patients

WAKENING in the morning Dr. Botts stirred and sat up in his bed. The odor of fresh paint assailed his nostrils, and he could hear Red's regular snore. The good doctor called Red, rubbed his eyes while Red answered grumpily, and then rolled over in bed again. It was up to Red to get the morning chores done.

Red, grunting, put on gee string and moccasins, donned the wig and blanket and stumbled out of the wagon. Within a minute his yell brought Dr. Botts from his bed as though a fire were under him. Clad only in his nightshirt, his beaver hat and his polished boots, Dr. Botts issued forth and then paused amazed and, instantly angry.

During the night someone had taken black paint and striped the wagon. Glistening black streaks bisected the sign; dripping black covered the gilt and was smeared over the tailgate.

"The mules is gone," Red gasped in Dr. Botts' ear. "The mules an' Helen."

Looking at the wagon tongue where normally Stomach and Bowels and Helen of Troy were wont to stand tied, Dr. Botts saw that this was indeed so. Wrath welled up in the little doctor. Beneath his nightshirt his pudgy chest swelled and his fat hands shook with anger. Even the fat calves of his legs, visible beneath his nightshirt, showed his anger as he stalked back to the wagon.

He dressed hurriedly. Eyes blazing he issued from the wagon and with Red trailing him, went to the saloon. The bartender, Gus Arkind, was behind the bar, grinning and twisting his mustache.

"Who," thundered Dr. Botts, "defaced my wagon?"

"You havin' trouble, Doc?" queried Arkind.

"Some rascal, some vandal with malicious intent, smeared black paint over my wagon. Who was it?"

Arkind shook his head. "I wouldn't know," he answered. "I told you that you needed a watchman, Doc."

Dr. Botts snorted. "And my livestock," he rasped. "My mules and my horse. They're gone."

"That's too bad." Nothing in Arkind's voice said that he thought it was too bad. "I heared that there was some loose stock in town an' that Blackie Bond throwed 'em in the pound. We got a herd law in Silver Bell, Doc."

"Bond . . ." began Dr. Botts.

"Slick Noonan is Justice of the Peace," said Arkind. "I reckon you'll have to see him to get yore stock, Doc."

"I'll see him!" vowed Dr. Botts. "Justice . . . bah!"

Still with the faithful Red trailing him he stalked out of the saloon. He had hardly reached the street before he saw Bond, black beard combed and gleaming in the early morning sun, moving toward the restaurant. Bond carried a bundle of clothing under his

arm and he stopped when Dr. Botts yelled at him.

"Sure I put them mules an' that horse in the pound," he agreed equably when accused by the wrathy doctor. "Sure I did. We got a herd law in Silver Bell. It'll cost you fifty dollars a head an' the feed bill, to get 'em out. You'll have to go to court an' pay yore fine."

Bond grinned. Anger supplanting sense, Dr. Botts reached under his coat. He would show this grinning ape just how much fine he would pay and he would use that bundle of clothes to rub the paint from his wagon. Dr. Botts stopped and his face paled. In his wrath and haste he had not dressed completely. The 32-20 was gone!

"Court'll be at ten o'clock," said Bond, watching Dr. Botts, his own hand under his coat tails. "You can pay yore fine an' get yore stock then. I told you you needed a watchman, Doc."

"This," said Dr. Botts, and some of the assurance was gone from his voice, "is an outrage. It is a slimy imposition. I . . ."

"You'll pay yore fine," assured Blackie. "So long, Doc. See you in court." He walked on, looking back over his shoulder until he reached the restaurant.

Dr. Botts' plump jaw set grimly. Dr. Botts wheeled and almost running over Red Sutter, stalked to his wagon. Safe within its interior he rectified the incompleteness of his attire, strapping on the 32-20.

"What we goin' to do, Doc?" Red Sutter asked anxiously.

Dr. Botts looked at Red. "We're going to eat breakfast," he announced. "Then we're going to figure out a way to get even with Silver Bell."

In the restaurant Dr. Botts and his satellite repeated the meal of the evening before. The Amazon had been crying. Her eyes were red and to Dr. Botts it looked a great deal as though water was dripping over granite. During the course of the meal the good doctor discovered several things. He discovered that the bald-headed man was Reuben Hemstetter and that the Amazon's name was Sylvia. Sylvia! Dr. Botts winced. Somehow Sylvia did not fit with the raw bones and the rest of the ensemble. He also discovered that Sylvia Hemstetter was the camp laundress and he promised to bring over a shirt or two that needed washing.

LEAVING the restaurant, Dr. Botts, still followed by Red, went back along the street. He was looking for a crack in Silver Bell's armor, a way to get his knife into the case hardening of the town. Dr. Botts did not like Silver Bell and when he looked at his black-striped wagon the dislike grew to positive loathing.

Stopping at a saloon, a liquor emporium other than the canvas and board affair close by the wagon, he again encountered Blackie Bond. Blackie was coming out just as the doctor walked in and Blackie, seeing the doctor, grinned and putting his hand upon his gun butt, addressed the man of medicine.

"See you in court, Doc," said Blackie.

Dr. Botts snorted.

Inside the saloon, a small, hawk beaked man behind the bar was mopping the bar top vigorously and scowling at the door. Dr. Botts, bellying the plank that served for a counter, addressed the hawk-faced scowler.

"You seem distressed, my friend," said the doctor smoothly.

"Distressed?" snapped Hawkface. "I ain't distressed. I'm plain mad!"

"So?" Dr. Botts invited confidence.

"Yo're damn' right, so! This thievin' bunch of skullduggeryin' crooks! You know what I just done?"

The doctor shook his head.

"I just paid fifty dollars for a night watchman! That's what I done! Every

merchant in this town has got to come across to that bunch. If he don't he'll find his place wrecked an' his goods ruint! Night watchman! Why damn me! It's them that does the damage, but if you don't pay off they'll git you. What'll you have, friend?"

"A cigar," answered Dr. Botts. "Just one cigar. Maoris don't smoke."

He chewed the cigar reflectively and let the hawkfaced man spout. Dr. Botts had never learned anything while he was talking and he wanted information. He got it. Silver Bell was a good placer camp, so said Hawkface. The creek was good and there were some small tunnels back in the hills that were more than paying wages. But some two months ago a group had moved in on Silver Bell and taken over the town. Hawkface did not say how many there were in the gang, he did not know, but he did know that every business in the town, gambling, saloons, red lights, stores, were paying toll to it.

"They make you hire a night watchman," raged Hawkface. "They charge fifty dollars a week an' if you don't pay it they'll wreck yore joint."

"But what of the law?" queried the doctor.

"Slick Noonan is Justice of the Peace an' Blackie is town marshal," answered the saloon man. "They're the law! Hell, they're the whole works. They're the gang, too. The miners is too busy diggin' it out of the ground or washin' it out of the creek, to organize a vigilante committee, an' then them fellers leave the miners alone. They just take the business man."

"Why don't you throw them out?" Dr. Botts was practical.

"We tried it. Know what happened? We imported a gunman to do the job an' Blackie Bond killed him. Blackie's a gunner, he is. He's just poison an' Noonan is worse. They got the whole town over a barrel. Them an' their bunch hangs out down to Arkind's. He's throwed in with 'em. I'd give what I got to get even with that bunch, but I ain't got enough money to move an' I can't leave. The whole town's sick of 'em. They . . ."

"Sick," said Dr. Botts, meditatively. "The town is sick of them. Ah . . ." Chewing his cigar he turned and, leaving Hawkface still raging, strolled out of the saloon.

"Sick," said Dr. Botts outside the saloon. "I'm a doctor, Red. I am a man of medicine."

Red Sutter shivered. "When can I put on some pants, Doc?" he queried. "This here gee string is cold an' that damn' gun is rubbin' a hole in my belly. I'd sure love to have some pants."

"Sick," muttered Dr. Botts.

WALKING back toward the defaced wagon, the doctor lost in thought, the two passed the Hemstetter's restaurant. There was a washing on the line back of the building. Red paused and admired the line of clothes.

"Doc," he said, rousing Dr. Botts from his thoughts, "you see them long handled underwear back there? If I could just have a suit of them now I could keep warm. Couldn't you dye a suit an' let me wear it in place of my skin? It'ud sure be . . ."

Dr. Botts slapped his hand against his thigh. "Underwear!" he exclaimed. "If that belongs to the man I think it belongs to . . ."

Red Sutter was left staring at the flapping wash. Dr. Botts had scurried up the steps into Hemstetter's. When he emerged he was beaming, his cherubic countenance lighted by a smile for the first time that day. Straight to his wagon went Dr. Botts and momentarily scowling at the defacing black paint, into the wagon. There he searched diligently, presently straightening from a locker, holding a jar in his hands. In that jar was a blistering ointment, a salve that Dr. Botts in his professional capacity

as veterinarian, used to blister horses that had sweenied or that had splints. Dr. Botts knew the efficacy of that ointment. Using it was tantamount to using a hot iron. Holding the jar he left the wagon and searching about, found a stick that would serve as a paddle. It seemed to Dr. Botts that Silver Bell was indeed ill and that the town needed a strong counter irritant.

Red, left alone in the wagon, broached a bottle of the Universal Elixir and Solvent. Red had developed a fondness for the Solvent. It was almost fifty percent alcohol and that warmed him; the licorice gave it a pleasant taste, the coloring matter made it look pretty, and because he always riled the water when mixing a batch, the Solvent had plenty of good creek mud for body. Red shook up the bottle, opened it and took a drink. He took another drink, and a third. A sociable soul, Red. He disliked to drink alone. With the fifth inhalation from the bottle, warmed and comfortable, Red searched in a locker under a bunk, found his pants and put them on. Then, pausing, bottle in hand, he nodded vigorously. There was a man in Silver Bell who needed consolation. Reuben Hemstetter at the restaurant. If ever a man needed a friend Reuben needed one. Red got three more bottles of Solvent, bestowed them in his trousers, adjusted his gun, and sallied forth.

"Time he drinks a bottle or two of this, he'll mebbe quit his 'theein',' an' 'thouin',' " muttered Red. "What kind of talk is that, anyhow?" Armed and equipped, Red made for the Hemstetter restaurant.

DR. BOTTS, his mission at the restaurant accomplished, went along Silver Bell's street searching for the Justice office. A lounger directed him and Dr. Botts went to the board shack that had been pointed out. Entering the shack he found court in session. There was a table in the building and behind the table sat a man that overflowed his chair. With the instinctive dislike of the small man for the big one, Dr. Botts looked at the chair sitter. The look was returned from a pair of muddy expressionless eyes. Black Bond, sliding to his feet from his seat on the table, grinned at Dr. Botts and three of the other four men in the room also grinned. The man behind the table did not twitch a muscle of his fat face.

"Here he is, Slick," said Bond. "Here's the man that lets his livestock run loose. I had to put 'em all in the pound last night."

From the expressionless face a flat voice issued. "Fifty dollars a head an' costs. That's ten dollars a head more. One hundred an' eighty dollars. You had better hire a watchman."

"That," announced Dr. Botts, "is robbery. I won't pay it."

"Suits me," said the fat man behind the table. "We'll sell the mules an' the horse for the fine an' their expense. You owe me fifty dollars for a license fee. Yo're doin' business in Silver Bell."

"I won't pay it," snorted Dr. Botts.

"Then we'll impound yore wagon." Still no expression in voice or face.

Dr. Botts thought hastily. "I'll have to have a little time to get the money together," he announced, backing down. "I can pay you tomorrow, maybe."

"Tomorrow's Sunday. You'll pay tonight."

Still raging, but hiding his rage, Dr. Botts nodded. He knew that the next day was Sunday. He was figuring on that. The fact that this was Saturday figured largely in his plan for getting even with Silver Bell. "I'll get the money together tonight," promised Dr. Botts meekly.

"I'll collect it," said Slick Noonan. "Next case."

There was no other case but Dr. Botts knew that he was dismissed. Wheeling, he walked out of the shack.

Back at his wagon the doctor looked in vain for Red Sutter. Red was nowhere in evidence. Fuming internally the doctor left his wagon and went to a store. He had to get that black paint off before it dried. Red should have been on hand to do the job but Red was not on hand. Vowing mentally to fire Red, to let him go and stew in his own juice, Dr. Botts purchased turpentine and returned to his wagon. There, with much perspiration, some profanity, and a good deal of black paint on his hands he set about removing the defilement. The black paint came off reluctantly under the ministrations of turpentine and a rag, but it did come off.

At noon, going to Hemstetter's for dinner, Dr. Botts found the granite faced Sylvia alone and swamped with work. Her husband was gone, she told the doctor as she placed his food before him. She was worried.

"Reuben," Sylvia said sadly, "slippeth from grace at times. If thee see him wilt thee send him home?"

Dr. Botts nodded. "I will," he agreed. "And don't forget to let me know when Bond's wash gets dry."

"I will tell thee," answered Sylvia and went on to attend to the wants of an impatient customer.

BY MID-AFTERNOON Dr. Botts had the black paint off the wagon. Blackie Bond had watched the last part of the doctor's labors and had encouraged him in them. Dr. Botts was sweating with rage when he had finished. Blackie strolled away and the doctor was about to go out in search of Red when he saw the rawboned Sylvia removing the wash from the line behind the restaurant. Red would have to wait. Puffing and with his fat little belly jiggling like calvesfoot jelly, Dr. Botts hurried to the Hemstetters.

Red Sutter did not need to be searched for. Red was up on the little rise above Silver Bell, warm and comfortable in pants and blanket, in good company, and with half a case of Solvent. Reuben Hemstetter lay under a juniper tree close by, a bottle of Solvent clasped in his big fist.

"Art thee sure that this is medicine?" questioned Reuben for the twentieth time.

"Sure, it's medicine," agreed Red, taking a drink from his bottle. "It's a Maori remedy an' it's mighty good to drink."

"Are thee truly a Maori, Red?" questioned Reuben, drinking from his bottle.

"As much Maori as you are Quaker," Red said practically. "Doc Botts taken an' turned me into a Maori."

"And Sylvia converted me to the faith of the Friends," sighed Mr. Hemstetter. "Sometimes, Red, I wonder if it was all for the best."

"If sayin', 'thee' an' 'thou,' makes you feel good I reckon it was," Red assured. "How does that, 'thee' an' 'thou' work?"

"Not," said Reuben, "so good. Sometimes, Red, I wish that I was unregenerate once more."

"So you could swear," Red surmised. "Rube, how'd you get so bald?"

"By inheritance," Mr. Hemstetter answered. "My great-grandpappy was scalped and kilt by the Injuns an' ever since then us Hemstetters has been bald."

Red frowned. "I don't sabe that," he said. "Yore grandpappy was kilt an' scalped an' you inherit it. That ain't reasonable. If he hadn't been kilt I might see how . . ."

Reuben waved a weary hand. "Never thee mind, Red," he interrupted. "Anyhow it was my great-grandpappy. We ain't liked Injuns since that time. Are thee sure that thee ain't an Injun, Red?"

"I'm a Maori," Red insisted. "Want to hear me yell an' prove it?"

Again Reuben waved his hand. "Yellin' might bring Sylvia," he ob-

jected. "The Injun that kilt my great-grandpappy swung a tomahawk on him. Dost thee use a tomahawk, Red?"

"I'm the best damn' tommyhawker in the Maoris," Red assured. "Want me to show thee....Hell, you got *me* doin' it!"

"How dost thee swing one?" questioned Reuben.

"Like this." Red swung his arm in a circle, bringing down an imaginary ax upon the unsuspecting head of an imaginary enemy.

Reuben watched the blow critically and shook his head. "Thou are awkward," he announced. "The Sioux do it better. The Sioux that kilt an' scalped great-grandpappy did it this away." Reuben illustrated.

"Well," Red granted the superiority of Reuben's illustration, "I ain't so good without somethin' in my hand."

"Use a bottle," suggested Mr. Hemstetter.

"Nope," Red refused the idea. "Got to drink from the bottles. Anyhow Doc'ud kill an' scalp me if I was to break one. Tell you what: We'll drink the bottles dry an' then we'll take 'em back to camp an' find somethin' soft for me to hit an' I'll show you."

"Good," agreed Reuben. "Wilt thou have another drink, Red?"

"Yeah," said Red, "I sure wilt."

CHAPTER III
Hell's Own Fire

DOWN in Silver Bell, Dr. Botts alternately swore at the missing Red and at the slowness with which affairs were moving. Back in his wagon he had missed the Elixir and Solvent. Red had it, Dr. Botts knew. The doctor was fully cognizant of Red's taste for Elixir. Red would be crying drunk when he showed up. Dr. Botts did not care a great deal if Red never showed up but he did wish that the redhead had not taken the bottles; he was low on bottles.

As for his plan, Dr. Botts had to wait. The day was Saturday. Men bathed and changed on Saturday night and Dr. Botts was hoping that Blackie Bond would be no exception to the rule. He hoped, too, that Blackie had only two suits of underwear. He was counting on that. Blackie did not look like a man that would have more than two suits of under-garments. Indeed, Dr. Botts was surprised that Blackie had any at all. Still, Mrs. Hemstetter had assured him on that point.

Waiting in his wagon, fuming impatiently, Dr. Botts made what preparation he could for the culmination of his scheme. He put three bottles of Solvent in a small satchel, added Boluses and Balsam Balm, and strapped a small clip holster to his wrist. In the clip of the holster he placed a .41 caliber, double-barreled derringer, first making sure that it was loaded. Dr. Botts trusted the 32-20 but it was just as well to have an ace in the hole. The sun sank lower, Red failed to appear, and the plan did not materialize. Dr. Botts swore histrionically. Saturday night and no baths yet. Perhaps Blackie Bond only bathed every other Saturday. Perhaps he did not bathe at all. If he did not, then the plan was no good. Dr. Botts had pinned a feeble hope on inspiration, and inspiration was not working. Perhaps he had better figure out another scheme.

At six o'clock the good doctor ate at the Hemstetter restaurant. Sylvia was swamped again and Reuben had not shown up. Sylvia was still worried. Assuring her as best he might, the doctor went back to his wagon. He had to be there in case his plan did not fail, but he was afraid that it had already failed.

The early dusk fell. Up on the hill above Silver Bell, Red Sutter and Reuben Hemstetter argued wearily as to the relative merits of the Sioux tomahawk technique as compared to that of the Maori, with Red on the defending side. Down in Silver Bell

Dr. Botts sat in his wagon and held his head in his hands.

The doctor was brought to life by the sound of voices without. He arose from his seat and went to the curtain that screened the back of the wagon. There were men outside, the heavy bulk of Slick Noonan showing plain in the gathering dusk.

"What is it, gentlemen?" questioned Dr. Botts. "Do you need the services of a doctor? If so . . ."

"There's somethin' the matter with Blackie Bond," stated a voice. "He claims he's on fire. You know anythin' about medicine or are you just a fake?"

His professional reputation impugned, Dr. Botts drew himself up haughtily. "I hold diplomas in medicine from Moscow, from Heidelberg, from Danville, and from Rome," stated the doctor, inventing rapidly. "If you doubt my ability, I'll be only too glad to . . ."

Slick Noonan's flat voice interrupted. "Shut up and come on. Blackie claims he's on fire. Get what you need and come with us."

"My fee . . ." began Dr. Botts.

"We'll pay you," grated Noonan. "Come on."

Hastily Dr. Botts reached back for his small satchel.

WITH Noonan on one side and flanked on the other by a six-foot-three giant, Dr. Botts walked to Gus Arkind's saloon. There was a crowd in the place, Dr. Botts, pushing through the group, saw in it several of the merchants of Silver Bell. The man from whom he had bought the turpentine was there, and so was the hawkfaced saloon owner. Curiosity had brought the crowd together, not sympathy.

"Where is the patient?" demanded Dr. Botts.

"Back here," said Gus Arkind, pushing forward. "Gosh, Doc, do you suppose it's ketchin'?"

"I must make an examination," stated Dr. Botts.

With Arkind in the lead and with Noonan and the giant still on either side, Dr. Botts walked to the back of the canvas and board building. Blackie Bond lay on a cot and swore while two large and strong men held him to the canvas. Twisting and squirming, Blackie writhed against his confinement.

"Here's the Doc, Blackie," stated Noonan. "Look him over, Doc."

"Hold him still," commanded Dr. Botts.

The attendants, sweating against Blackie's contortions, did their best. Blackie was stretched out. Dr. Botts bent down over the man. The odor of the blister salve that had been smeared on Blackie's underwear, came reassuringly to the doctor's nostrils. That blister salve must have a lot of Spanish Fly in it, the doctor thought. Anyhow it was good stuff, good and strong. Deftly the doctor opened Blackie's shirt and undershirt. Red spots stood out on Blackie's chest. Blister ointment and wool underwear make a wonderful combination.

"When did this strike you?" asked the doctor.

Somewhat assured by the doctor's presence, Blackie Bond quit his writhing. "Am I goin' to die, Doc?" he quavered. "I'm on fire. I'm burnin' up. Seems like the whole hide is comin' off of me. I'd taken an bath an' cleaned up. It's Saturday night an' all, an' I was goin' to see a gal, an' this thing just struck me."

Dr. Botts straightened, pursing his lips and looking grave.

"Hmmmmm," said Dr. Botts.

"What is it, Doc?" demanded the giant that flanked him.

Dr. Botts shook his head. "Very sad," he announced. "Very sad, gentlemen. I've never seen a case just like it."

"What's the matter with him?"

Slick Noonan's voice was still expressionless, but forceful nevertheless.

"Your friend," said Dr. Botts deliberately, "has the epizootic of the pylorus. That is all I can say at present."

"Gosh," Dr. Botts' giant guard took a step back. "Is it ketchin', Doc?"

"It is very contagious," stated Dr. Botts with conviction.

"Is there anythin' we can take?" demanded the giant anxiously. "Is there anything that'll keep us from gettin' it?"

Blackie Bond's two attendants had let go their holds and were standing, their faces white. "I had right aholt of him," said one.

"Me, too," announced the other.

"I am glad to tell you that I have a specific in my grip that will prevent the disease," stated the doctor, reassuringly. "I'll be glad to give it to you gentlemen, but it is very expensive."

One guard pulled out gold from his pocket, double eagles. The other hauled out a poke of gold dust. "Here," the man with the gold pieces pushed forward eagerly, thrusting the money into the doctor's hand. "Give me some, Doc. Give me . . ."

"Wait," Slick Noonan's voice was cold. "I don't think there's anythin' the matter with Blackie."

Dr. Botts led with his ace. "Very well," said the doctor coldly, "I force my medicines upon no man. If you don't want . . ."

"Give me that medicine," rasped the tall man. "Mebbe yo're damn fool enough to take a chance, Slick, but I ain't. Give it to me, Doc."

The men of Slick Noonan's gang paused uncertainly around Dr. Botts. Slick, the leader, had spoken, but here before them was evidence that Blackie Bond was mighty sick. Blackie himself turned the tide. Blackie had been quiet under the ministrations of the doctor. Now he twisted and groaned. "My Lord, I'm afire," wailed Blackie.

"Give me that medicine!" rasped the giant, again. "Be a damn' fool if you want to be, Slick. I'm playin' safe."

Dr. Botts bent down. Opening his grip he took from it the boluses, each as big as a walnut and as black and rough. "Here," he said.

The big guard came first. He gave Dr. Botts two double eagles and almost choked on the boluses. The man with the gold poke came next. Each in turn, as fast as Dr. Botts could work, received his dose and paid for it. Dr. Botts had his pockets full of money and his bag empty of boluses before they were done crowding forward. Even some of the townsmen came and paid and partook. They rated it, thought the doctor grimly. If they were fools enough to let this gang run over them, they deserved what was in the boluses. The chief ingredient of the boluses was croton oil and each in its way was as effective as a well placed stick of dynamite. Dr. Botts, with twelve boluses delivered and swallowed, stood erect.

"That is all, gentlemen," he said. "I suggest now that you leave your poor suffering friend. There is no need of any of you catching the disease. After all . . ."

Slick Noonan was bending over Blackie. Slick had taken no part in the mob around the doctor. Now Noonan straightened up. He held out his hand and his expressionless voice for once held wrath.

"It's somethin' on Blackie's undershirt," yelled Noonan. "That quack has doped Blackie! It's grease. Look here."

CHAPTER IV
Cured!

THE big guard grabbed Dr. Botts. Others swarmed around Noonan. They looked at the evidence he held

out, the back of his hairless hand shining in the light of the kerosene lamp that gleamed on a wall bracket. The grease of the ointment was plain upon the back of that hand and under the grease the skin was reddening. As though to make asurance doubly sure, there came a commotion at the door of the saloon. Someone in the crowd attended to the interruption. In the silence that suddenly filled the place, a woman's voice came clearly: "It's for that doctor. He left it at the restaurant. Hast any of thee seen my Reuben."

No one had seen Reuben. The man at the door so informed her, then he came pushing through the crowd, reaching the spot where Dr. Botts confronted Slick Noonan. Holding out a jar the man who had come from the door spoke.

"That was Mrs. Hemstetter. She said you left this at the restaurant, Doc."

Noonan snatched the jar and with a twist removed the top. He smelled the top, dipped a finger into the container, held it there a moment, and then jerked it out with an involuntary exclamation. His eyes were no longer muddy, but rested hotly upon Dr. Botts. "So?" snarled Noonan. "That's the way you done it, huh?"

Without waiting for confirmation from the doctor, he addressed the crowd. "He took this stuff an' smeared it on Blackie's underclothes," Noonan rasped. "Blackie had 'em up to Hemstetters' to git 'em washed. This here stuff is blister dope. It's hot as hell. That's why Blackie is burnin' up. Grab him, boys!"

Dr. Botts was already held by the big six-foot-three guard and another man who closed in upon his other side. They held him by either arm, and Noonan, backing a step for room, heavy body squarely against the wall, hips pressing the boards, shoulders against the canvas, deliberately reached to his waistband and pulled out a heavy gun.

Red Sutter, with fire in his eye, was out to show them he was not a Sioux, but a Maori.

"Just hold him so," commanded Noonan. "I'll give him a pill that will cure him."

Pill! The idea flashed into Dr. Botts' mind. Pill!

"Wait!" he commanded hoarsely. "Those pills I give you were poison. I'm the only man that can save you. Wait!"

Many times in his life Dr. Botts had occupied the center of the stage. Before he had always enjoyed it, but now . . . now he was sweating freely and there was no pleasure in it.

"Poison!" gasped the tall man who held the doctor. "Poison! I'm beginnin' to feel it. I feel damn' queer."

Slick Noonan threw back his head and laughed. The canvas shook with the laughter. "Poison!" shrilled Noonan. "I'll poison you, Boots!"

UP on the hill as the sun descended, Red, "Amok," Sutter and Reuben Hemstetter gave up their

profitless argument. "You come on an' I'll show you," vowed Red. "I'll show you how a Maori swings a tommyhawk. Come on Rube."

Reuben Hemstetter grunted and tried to get up. Bottles of Solvent pinned him to the ground. Red, more accustomed to the Solvent, struggled to his feet, and aided Reuben. Equipped with a good sized beer bottle in each hand, the two took their shambling, staggering way toward the town of Silver Bell. They were delayed in their journey by Reuben's urgent plea that they go around.

"Sylvia is right that away," urged Reuben. "We got to go 'round. Iffen she sees me . . ." Mr. Hemstetter left it to Red's imagination as to what would happen.

Accordingly they made a circuit and arrived in Silver Bell by the back door, as it were. Red made directly for the wagon and Reuben went with him. That wagon was home to Red Sutter. Traveling toward it they arrived behind the canvas and shack saloon. Still arguing at that point, Red stopped in mid-stagger.

"There," he pointed to the canvas, "that's soft. Show me how a Sioux swings a tommyhawk, an' hit that."

There was laughter inside the saloon, bitter, swelling laughter with no trace of mirth in it.

"I got to have a target," expostulated Reuben.

"Hit that bulge," said Red. "You take the first whack an' I'll take the next. Any time a Maori can't beat the Sious!"

"They kilt an' scalped my great grandpappy," said Reuben, and stepping forward, swung a bottle with all his uncertain strength. There came a whack, the bottle splintered leaving only the neck in Reuben's hand, and the bulge was gone.

"My turn," announced Red briskly. "Now watch me!" Another bulge appeared in the canvas and Red, taking a step, swung his right hand bottle and then the left. Both bottles broke.

"Thee hast spoiled the target," complained Reuben.

"Damn' hard canvas," said Red.

Momentary silence reigned. Then from inside the saloon came the sound of a shot and, closely following, another.

"Shootin' at the Injuns," said Reuben.

"Let's go," Red said.

Reuben was agreeable. "Around in front. We got to help 'em fight the Injuns off."

Tugging at the six shooter in his trousers, Red Sutter made his staggering way toward the front of the saloon and, bewildered but game, Mr. Hemstetter followed him.

INSIDE the saloon there was tense excitement. While Slick Noonan, gun in hand, stood laughing, Dr. Botts lived a lifetime. Blackie Bond, red with rage and with blister ointment, had come up off the cot, reaching for a gun as he came. Blackie was not too quick-witted but he had caught Noonan's explanation of the thing that had happened to him and he was intent on revenge. Noonan, with his head thrown back and still laughing, raised the gun he held. Then suddenly his eyes were blank and he was toppling forward, falling as a tree might fall, slowly and all in one piece. Slick Noonan hit the floor face down and for an instant lay there. So much for the tomahawk technique of the Sioux, as exemplified by Reuben Hemstetter.

The big guard that held Dr. Botts' right arm released his hold and started forward. So impetuous was his motion that he could not check, but ran his head squarely into the canvas wall. Red Sutter, demonstrating the superiority of the Maori, had the big man's own momentum to help him. The big guard went down and out like a light.

Dr. Botts seized the opportunity. His right hand flashed across to his left wrist. The little derringer thudded its message and stopped Blackie Bond's half finished draw. Dr. Botts could not pick and choose. He simply shot Blackie in the biggest part: the belly. Slick Noonan, not completely out, was trying to get up. Slick still held his gun, and taking no chances Dr. Botts lent Noonan the other slug in the stingy gun. Then, dropping the little weapon, he flashed the 32-20 from beneath his coat, cracked the relaxing hand that held his left wrist, and with a swift step and turn was facing the crowd.

"Well, gentlemen?" Dr. Botts said crisply.

The crowd, momentarily surprised, saw that blue Colt and the firm and pudgy hand that held it. They saw blue eyes narrowed into slits. They stopped their forward surge, and in the rear men moved away. From the door came a voice.

"Where's the Injuns?" Red Sutter, big Colt in hand, issued into the saloon and behind Red came Reuben Hemstetter, one had holding a broken bottle, the other gripped around one that was still intact.

"Wilt thee show us the Injuns?" queried Reuben.

"Red!" snapped Dr. Botts.

"Huh?" said Red. "Oh, yeah, Doc?"

"Cover 'em!" ordered the doctor.

Red's big Colt came up. Red was drunk but the Colt was not. That was a fine point to be recognized and the men in the rear of the crowd saw it.

"I got 'em," announced Red.

"Are they Injuns?" demanded Hemstetter, swinging the bottle.

"Oh, my God!" wailed a man close to Dr. Botts. "My Lord, I'm sick! I got to get out of here!"

The boluses were taking hold.

Looking about him Dr. Botts saw more than one pale face, saw more than one hand stealing toward a griping belly. Dr. Botts grinned. His eyes caught and held those of the little hawkfaced bartender who had contributed fifty dollars for a night watchman.

"There they are," said Dr. Botts. "If you want to run 'em out, they're yours."

The hawkfaced man gave a little gurgling whoop. "Let's take 'em!" he shrilled.

There was commotion after that as the men of Silver Bell moved in. Blackie Bond was dead, very dead. Slick Noonan was not dead but a rope and a tree limb would attend to that. The sheep had been sorted from the goats for Silver Bell, and, more than that, the goats were sick. Botts' Boluses were laboring in the interests of civic improvement, laboring mightily. Dr. Botts watched the scene, amusement growing in his blue eyes. This was going to be a night to remember. Holstering the 32-20 and retrieving the derringer from the floor, he moved toward Red Sutter.

"Come on, Red," ordered Dr. Botts. "We've got to open up. We can sell some Elixir and Solvent tonight."

Red Sutter lurched under the doctor's grasp. Colt still in hand, leaning against the plank bar of Gus Arkind's saloon, Red Sutter was asleep.

ON Sunday night, twenty miles out of Silver Bell, Dr. Archimedes Copernicus Botts and his assistant, Red Sutter (sometimes called Amok, the Maori) made camp, unhitching the mules, Red watered them and Helen of Troy. Returning from the creek Red took a pot shot at a rabbit and considering the aching condition of his head, did well. Dr. Botts taking his ease, heard the shot but paid no heed.

Later, while the camp fire crackled and Red bent above frying pan and dutch oven, the good doctor descended from the wagon and reclined upon the ground. Lying there he counted a

handful of bills, piled a little tower of gold pieces before him and fondly weighed two pokes of gold dust.

"Professional services," murmured Dr. Botts. "This is the first time I ever cured a town though. Red, we'll have to change the sign and get that in some way."

Red Sutter turned browning rabbit with an expert fork. "Didn't that bartender look funny with them tar an' feathers on him?" he asked, recalling past events. "Looked like he was goin' to shed, he did, runnin' down the road."

"Arkind," murmured Dr. Botts. "That was his name. "It's a shame the tar gave out and they had to hang that other rascally one with Noonan."

"Yeah," Red agreed. "Hangin' ain't so funny. It ain't funny bein' married to a woman like that Sylvia, neither. I reckon old Rube will 'thee' an' 'thou' from now on."

The doctor made no reply to that and Red dished up the rabbit and pushed out the dutch oven. "Wilt thee have some rabbit, Doc?" asked Red. "It's done fried. An' say, tell me somethin'."

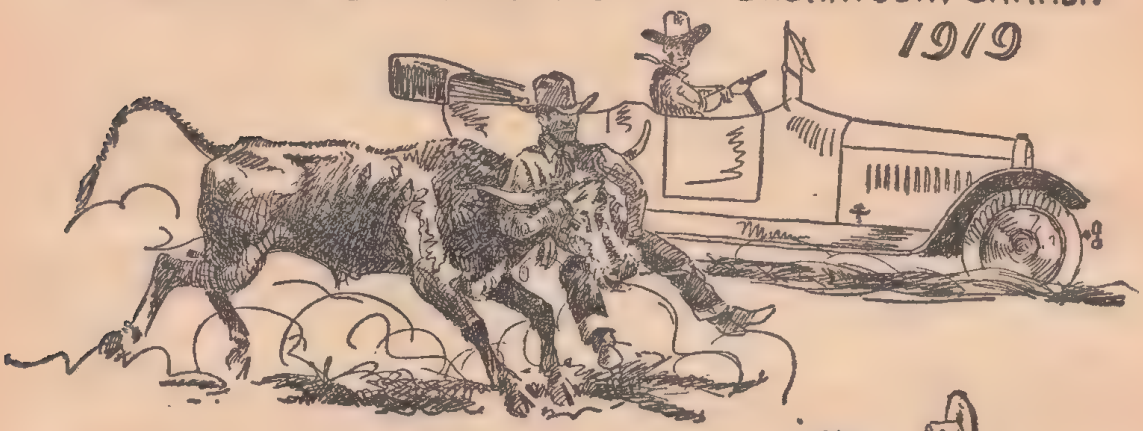
"What?" asked Dr. Botts getting up and moving to the fire.

"Can a man inherit bald headedness from his great grandpappy after his grandpappy dies?" asked Red, and reached for the rabbit.

COW COUNTRY SAVVY

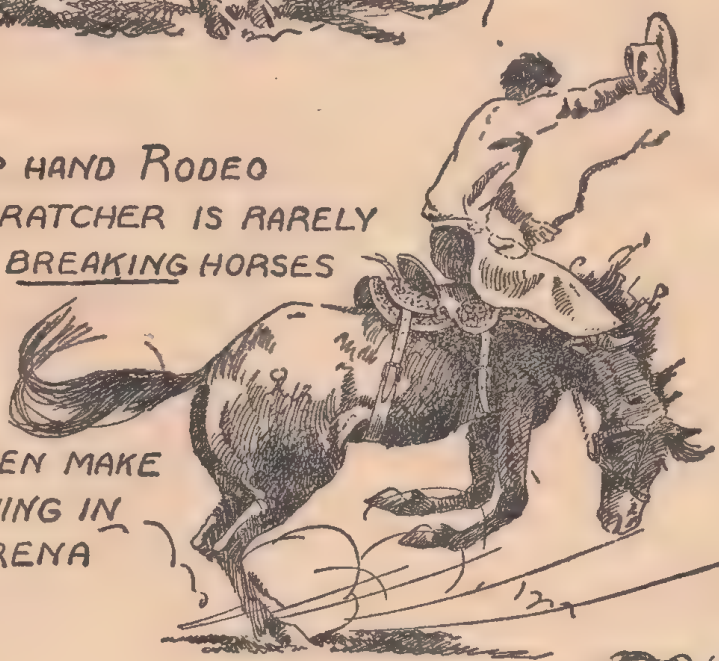
BY E. W. THISTLETHWAITE

THE DISTINCTION OF BEING THE FIRST MAN TO BULLDOG A STEER FROM AN AUTOMOBILE IS CLAIMED BY PINKY GIST — SASKATOON, CANADA 1919



EVEN A TOP HAND RODEO BRONK SCRATCHER IS RARELY GOOD AT BREAKING HORSES

WHILE MANY "A No 1" WILD-HORSE MEN MAKE A POOR SHOWING IN A CONTEST ARENA



BANDIT BAIT

BY KENNETH SINCLAIR

A suspense-filled story of a two-gun, two-fisted man to whom friendship meant more than the law.

SOMEBODY was moving in the darkness. A spur tinkled faintly —the click of a thumbed-back gun hammer whipped through the air.

Texas Slim Harbord, standing in the doorway and a perfect target for the man he'd cornered in the Rafter V's deserted line cabin, dodged to one side and rolled into the shelter of the stove. The roar of a smokepole battered the shack's walls. Flame ripped briefly through the dark, then was gone. And the hombre who was cornered gave a low curse—he knew he'd missed.

With his Peacemaker poised alertly in his hand, Harbord inched to the stove. Something tense and furry

touched his leg. "Down, Tim!" he whispered. His dog growled, but obeyed.

But the cornered man had heard the command, and started throwing lead as fast as he could thumb hammer. Plumb panicked, the hombre seemed; yet he retained enough cunning to dodge after every shot, so that Harbord couldn't spot his position by watching the muzzle-flame of his smokepole.

Harbord, though, had nighthawked enough herds to learn the virtues of patience. He rested his Peacemaker on the rusty top of the stove, counted his opponent's shots until the man's gun was empty. Then the Texan distributed five, carefully-placed shots along the rear wall of the shack.

They drew a groan of startled pain. A gun thudded to the plank floor, and Harbord snapped, "Go get him, Tim!"

A furry thunderbolt lunged forward. The cornered man gave one screech of terror. There was a scuffling sound, a tinkle of spurs—but then, nothing more. Nothing but a series of puzzled yips from the dog.

Harbord waited for a tense half-minute. Then, with his left hand, he thumbed a match into flame. The feeble glow revealed the excited dog, and a nickel-plated revolver which lay on the floor with its loading-gate open. The gunnysack which had covered the line-cabin's paneless rear window now was askew—the killer had slipped out through that window.

And Chet Whitely was in the Gunpowder Gap calaboose, pointed for hanging unless Harbord could prove his tall contention that the kid was innocent. The man who had escaped was the key to the case.

The Texas man wheeled, darted to the line-cabin's door.

Hoofs thudded as a dim shape rounded the end of the sod-roofed shack, streaked toward Harbord's bronc.

The Texan dropped to one knee and slammed his last shot at the fleeing rider. But just as he fired, the eager Tim jostled past him. The slug went wild.

He hit the ground running, reloaded with feverish haste while he raced toward his horse. But the already-mounted killer reached the ground-hitched roan first—grabbed the roan's reins, yanked the animal to a gallop, and was gone into the night.

Harbord emptied his reloaded Peacemaker in the general direction of his man, but the slugs wailed away from granite boulders in snarling ricochets.

Tim had streaked off in pursuit of the horses—but Harbord called the dog back. That killer hombre might have another iron on him somewhere, and the Texan figured his luck was spun thin enough already, without having his dog shot.

He stalked back into the cabin, struck another match.

Under its glow he noticed that the floor planks had been disturbed. He lifted one of them, found a cache underneath. There was just one thing in the cache now—an empty Wells-Fargo money bag, but that was enough.

It was for robbery and murder of the Gunpowder Gap express agent that Chet Whitely was sentenced to hang.

Harbord picked up the nickel-plated revolver, eyed the four notches on its butt. Terrified by the dog's attack, blinded by the dark, the killer had left in Harbord's hands a damning bit of evidence, even though it was too dark to see the man's face.

"Le's go, Tim," the Texan said. "We got us a large chunk of hikin' tuh do—got tuh hit town b'fore mornin'."

SHERIFF LANG HATTON was a droopy little oldster, harried by hard knocks, yet clinging stubbornly to one remaining vanity—his snowy longhorn moustache.

Several times the sheriff had eased Chet Whitely out of scrapes. Now,

Hatton peered out of the window of his office, scowled resentfully at the gray dawn which crept over Gunpowder Gap.

"B'damn, I'd like to help yuh," the sheriff said heavily. "But things stack up the wrong way—first Chet has a run-in with the Wells-Fargo agent at a dance, then the agent is found with two .45 slugs in his back. An' the best Chet c'n say f'r hisself is that he drunk maybe too much that night, woke up when the dew sobered him, out behind Sol Parl's barn. Hisself he don't know but what he done it—he says he was mad enough at that agent fella. An' you know Chet's temper." Regretfully, Hatton shoved at the empty Wells-Fargo sack and the nickel-plated revolver that Harbord had placed on the desk. "It won't do, Slim. Folks are some riled about this matter. Ain't a thing I c'n legally do to stop the—the hangin'. Yuh'd have to see the jedge. He's down in Calavera—"

"Forty miles away!" Harbord said. He put his range-bronzed hands on the sheriff's desk, leaned his gaunt frame forward. "Lang, yuh can't kill Chet this mornin'! I've trailed with that hot-head for too many years tuh see him hang for somebody else's crime."

Savagely, Harbord gripped the Wells-Fargo sack and the revolver, one in each hand. "I told yuh I've been on the scout, ever since the trial. A week back, I took me a sashay tuh that line-cabin. Would of passed it by, if Tim hadn't smelled somethin', raised a fuss. Then I got tuh nosin', found spur-marks on the step. So I settled me down tuh watch—las' night somebody come. An' this sack—Lang, it proves—"

"Exactly nothin'," the sheriff interrupted wearily. "Lor' knows I'm f'r Chet, right down the line—but this ain't evidence you brung me. Most anybody could of cached this sack in the line-cabin. An' this-here gun—" The sheriff juggled the weapon in his hand, tried to keep from meeting the challenge of Harbord's steel-gray eyes. "It might belong tuh some outsider, even."

"Come again," Harbord retorted. "The hombre knowed my dog—was scared stiff of him. Lang, you keep a mighty close check on shootin' irons in this town. Who packs a nickeled pole, with four notches in the butt where everybody'll see 'em?"

The sheriff considered for a long time. Then at last he perked up a bit, stirred. "Trent Robeck! I remember now, I took his iron away from him once when he got drunk an' shot up the Silver Dollar. He—"

"Robeck, huh?" the Texas man said harshly. "I'll get him, hammer the truth out of him."

But the lawman shook his head. "He ain't hit town for three-four days. Slim, yo're on a blind trail. Ain't but one thing'd stop the hangin' now."

"What's that?"

"The money that was stole at the time of the killin'. The money you figure Robeck had cached in that cabin. Recover that loot, with proper proof that it was in the possession of anybody but Chet, an' on my own authority I'll delay the hangin'."

"Robeck might be holed up anywhere," Harbord ground out. "I'm needin' time, sheriff—don't yuh savvy I got tuh have more time? Look here: Robeck stole my bronc. But that horse is a wise one—once before I tried tuh sell him, an' he broke away. High-tailed back tuh the Rafter V's remuda! He'll do the same now. An' when he does, I'll follow his sight, straight tuh Robeck!"

Lang Hatton licked his lips, looked up at the dusty wall-clock, wiped a bead of sweat from his cheek. "I'd call it one hell of a long gamble, Slim—but I'll chance it. I'll delay the—execution till noon. That's the best I c'n do. Now you go tell Chet. He'd admire to hear it from you."

Whitely was in the cell at the far end of the corridor. Slim Harbord

stalked along, with his spurs making a musical tinkle in the thick, oppressive silence. Tim's claws made scratching sounds on the concrete floor, as the big, black dog followed along.

Harbord's partner was standing at the barred window of his cell, looking out into the jail yard where Windy Lees, the town's carpenter, was putting the finishing touches on the scaffold. Harbord leaned against the cold bars of the door.

"Chet," he called softly.

Catlike and tense as a fiddlestring, the little cuss whirled. His face was gray, drawn. He had changed plenty—this wasn't the carefree, peppery Chet of old. Something inside him had been snuffed out.

"Got news, Chet," Harbord said swiftly. "Hatton's agreed tuh postpone the show. Till noon. By that time I'll have the guy who really killed that fool clerk."

"That's sure fine, Slim," the prisoner said. "I want you tuh know I appreciate all you've tried to do."

That stung—Whitely had no hope left, now. The best Harbord could do was grip the prisoner's hand, hard, then swing around and get out of there.

HE SECURED a bronc at the livery barn, rode out to the Rafter V with Tim trailing along.

The sun was mounting swiftly into a brassy sky—and Harbord's pent-up feelings demanded action, pronto. He hankered to ride hellbent to the line-cabin, try to pick up Robeck's trail from there. But the long ride would cost too much precious time, and the killer was sly enough to have covered his sign by riding on hard ground and through creeks.

There was one terrifying possibility—that Robeck had dusted out of the Gunpowder Gap country. But this didn't seem likely. Robeck, a dark, flinty sort of a hombre, didn't have but a faint idea as to just how much Harbord knew about this killing. And Robeck played each move the safe way—his careful framing of Chet Whitely proved that. He'd stick around the Gap, at least until after the hanging.

Harbord's throat was dry, tense, when he topped the last rise and looked down into the Rafter V's basin. The remuda was there—and so was Pronto, still wearing Harbord's Cheyenne tree, with a knot of puzzled cowhands gathered around him.

Maybe those gents thought it was a madman who barged through their group. They asked questions about the hanging, but got no answer. Harbord patted Pronto's neck, forked his tree, and dusted away.

He swung in a half-mile circle, tensely alert for sign. At least he found it—Pronto's off hind shoe was badly worn, and Harbord had been meaning to have it replaced. Now, he was mighty glad that he'd been lax. In contrast to the other shoes, that worn one identified Pronto's trail, and led the gaunt, grim Harbord straight to Quartz Canyon.

This was a petered-out bonanza, where there had been considerable gold excitement some years back. After the placer men had skimmed off the cream, a mining company had moved in, and sunk a shaft which promptly filled with water more rapidly than pumps could drain it. Now the canyon was deserted, unfrequented.

Yet Harbord had a sudden, ominous feeling at the back of his neck as he rode between the tailings-dump, and the rickety shack which had housed the hoisting machinery of the mine. Tim growled, trotted stiff-legged.

A rifle cracked savagely. The bullet screeched past Harbord's head, struck a boulder near the hoist-shack, ricocheted with an eerie wail.

Harbord, gripping his smokepole, swung down from the tree, struck Pronto an open-handed blow to get him out of danger.

As the bronc trotted reluctantly away, another rifle shot crashed out. The slug struck Harbord and he fell to his knees, gritting his teeth against the pain that surged through him from his right thigh.

But now he had the killer spotted. Robeck was holed up atop the tailings-dump. The hell of it was that the range was long, Robeck's cover too good for a short-gun to smoke him out—and with a game leg, Harbord couldn't hope to get in closer.

The Rafter V man could only slam some ineffectual shots to keep the killer down for a minute, and then hobble backward to the hoist-shack.

"Tim—heel!" Harbord commanded, as he dodged into the shack. The bristling dog obeyed.

Robeck sent a vindictive series of shots through the shack's walls. Bullets peeled great flakes of rust from the old boiler, stirred coils of rusty cable. Harbord bunkered down, cut the denim away from his wounded thigh.

The gash was deep, ugly. But the bullet had gone on through, and the blood came in a steady flow; not with the pulsing that would have signified a broken artery.

Soon Robeck's rifle was empty—and a heavy silence settled in the canyon while the killer reloaded.

"Hey!" Robeck's yell was thin, strident. "Harbord—what you want here?"

Grim humor tugged at the stockman's mouth. "Shoot first an' ask questions afterward, do you? We'll let yuh figure yore own answers, yuh coyote!"

Robeck let that settle for a minute. Then, "Le's be reasonable, Slim," he pleaded. "Yo're a smart hombre. I give you credit f'r that. An' I'm willin' to pay the tariff. What say we divvy the wad, each go our way? A man c'n live high, in the big towns, on—"

Anger thrummed through the gaunt Harbord. He was thinking of young Chet, gripping the bars of that cell in Gunpowder Gap. And he said, "Yuh can't trick me out intuh the open, an' yuh can't smoke me out of here. So settle down, coyote—the posse'll be along any minute now."

"What posse?" Robeck yelped. "Hell, that's a wobble-kneed bluff!"

"Think so?" Harbord retorted. "Then you bluff too—when they shake out the rope, tell 'em yuh got a rubber neck."

The killer emptied his rifle again. Harbord let loose a defiant yell to inform the hombre he'd done no damage.

Suddenly, a thunderous explosion broke the silence. Harbord peered through the cracks of the boards in the hoist-shack's walls, and as the dust settled, saw that a small crater had opened up on the flat ground toward his side of the tailings-dump. Robeck had some dynamite—but had not been able to throw the stick near the shack where the Tejano was holed up.

Harbord gave a grim laugh. There was no humor in anything now. This was a grim deadlock in which Robeck couldn't smoke out Harbord, and the Texan couldn't get to the killer.

The sun, shining through the cracks between the hoist-shack's boards, cast a lacework of lines across the machinery. Inexorably, those lines moved as the sun swung higher and higher.

HARBORD'S face was drawn now. He kept seeing young Chet's chalky face, kept remembering how the peppery spirit of the cuss had been deadened by impending death.

It was getting hot as blazes in the shack. Sweat coursed down Harbord's leathery cheeks—and he had spells of terrifying dizziness, brought on by the combined effects of heat, thirst, and his wounds.

With mounting agony, the hours dragged. Tim was getting thirsty too—panting, the dog tried several times to leave the shack in search of water.

Each time, Harbord restrained him. Robeck was just the sort of coyote who'd vent his wrath upon a dog.

Robeck had made no move, except to send a bullet through the shack now and then. Plainly, the hombre was stumped.

But so was Harbord. And precious time, time that meant life or death for Chet Whitely, was draining away.

Suddenly, Harbord clamped his hand upon the dog's shoulders.

"Oldtimer," Harbord said, "we both think a heap of Chet. For him, we're goin' tuh take an awful long chance." He searched the shack until he found a length of half-rotten rope, cut a five-foot length of it, fastened it to Tim's collar.

Then, holding the dog, he shouted to Robeck. "Hey, Trent! My dog's awful thirsty—will yuh let him cross over tuh that pool behind the dump? Must be water in it now, after the rains we've had—"

Robeck swore. Tension was getting him. . . . "I'm not givin' a damn what your pooch does! Lissen, Harbord, we got tuh make a deal!"

Harbord didn't answer that. He patted the dog, let him go. And Tim lined out, straight over the tailings dump, toward the water.

"You listenin', Harbord?" the killer bleated. "I say we got to get together on this—"

"Sure!" Harbord stated grimly—he knew blamed well if he stuck his head out he'd be a dead man. "You turn over that express money—all of it—to me. Then you surrender to the law!"

Robeck started to protest the severity of those terms—and then suddenly ceased speaking as Tim, on his way to the pool, passed close by the killer's hiding-place.

Taut, alert, the Texan waited. Maybe he'd been all wrong, risking Tim this way. But the cards were dealt.

Suddenly, Tim howled. Like a furry streak the dog topped the tailings dump, made a bee-line for Harbord. Something was tied to the dog's back—something that was afire.

It was dynamite—four sticks of it, capped and fused, tied to Tim's back. That fuse would be timed to ignite the powder just as the dog reached the hoist-shack. Dog and master would be blown to bits—that was the shrewd Robeck's way of breaking the deadlock.

Stockman's knife open in his hand, Harbord lunged out of the shack. Hobbling, he raced straight toward the oncoming dog. He heard the snap and twang of rifle bullets.

Harbord met the dog almost halfway to the tailings-dump, slashed the rope which bound the powder to Tim's collar. Gripping the bundle of sputtering, deadly sticks, he flung it toward Robeck's hiding-place.

Robeck saw it coming, screamed. But his scream was blotted out by the thunder of the blast.

HARBORD was pulling wads of money from the pockets of what was left of Robeck when Sheriff Lang Hatton arrived on a lathered bronc.

"Here—y'are, sheriff," the reeling Texan stated. "The express—money."

"Harbord, yo're in bad shape!" Hatton said, steadying the cowman. "The Rafter V boys rid tuh town, told me yore hoss came back tuh the ranch, that you lit out on him like yuh was loco."

"I ain't in—near as bad shape as that—skunk," Harbord gritted, looking down at the dead Robeck. "The hangin'—?"

"Postponed—permanent, now," Hatton said. "How'd yuh blow Robeck up?"

"We was—deadlocked. But the coyote had some—powder. I tied a rope tuh Tim, sent him up—here, tuh give Robeck a idea. Knew he'd be the kind tuh—use it. By damn, we fooled him, though."

Harbord looked down at his dog. Tim wagged his tail. Danged if he didn't grin, sort of. . . .

The Cactus City Gazette

BRONCO BLYNN, EDITOR

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COMPROMISE

Accuracy Sacrificed For Modesty

MAYBE some of you rannies don't understand this shindig which the Ladies Aid is putting on. Well, neither do I. And confidentially, I don't think the Ladies do either.

It was bad enough when they announced their "Pageant of Spring, Symbolic of Historic Heroines." Hell, it was a week before most of us found out that a pageant is nothing more than a parade. Only in a pageant you don't use your best horse and trappings. The idea is to rig up something to represent a Famous Woman of History.

But even after the Ladies made that explanation, they didn't stick to it. For instance, the first Famous Woman that Jackass Jake thought of was Calamity Jane. But when he went to get Mrs. Dinwiddie's approval, why she got very scornful indeed, and pointed out that the Heroine had to be a Historical Character like Pocohontas or Joan of Arc.

Jackass was put out, of course, but he wanted to do the right thing, so before he made another suggestion he borrowed a history book from Professor Hoenshall. In it he found a very appropriate Historical Heroine, so he trails back to Mrs. Dinwiddie, pretty sure of her approval when he told her he had selected Lady Godiva.

"Lady Godiva?" repeats Mrs. Dinwiddie, sort of stalling to cover up her own ignorance.

"Yeah, you know," said Jackass. "She was quite a heroine in her hometown in France because she saved the people a lot of money by

(*Continued Next Column*)

TOO MUCH BULL

Citizen Stretches His Story —Then His Neck

WELL, Dogy McDonald finally got his medicine at the end of a six strand rope. In a way it was kind of too bad because Dogy was one of the fanciest liars in the country. But that ability turned out to be fatal because Dogy got overconfident of his lying.

You know, when Dogy first started up that spread of his, he had only 8 or 10 she-critters. And when calving time came around, danged if there wasn't maybe 50 head of calves on his place.

Naturally folks was slightly suspicious, until Dogy explained that his she-stuff was a very special breed which could produce 6 to 8 calves per each. And being such a good liar, Dogy made folks believe his story.

Now, if'n he'd just stuck to that, he'd a been all right. But next spring he had even more calves, and he had to think up a new explanation. Which proved to be his undoing, because not even a Class A liar like Dogy could make folks believe that his *bulls* was having calves.

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ridin' through the streets bare naked on a white horse."

"AWK!" shrieked Mrs. Dinwiddie, in a strained voice like she had swallowed a peach seed. "That's unthinkable! Maybe it's even preposterous! A nude woman on a white horse! You can't do that!"

Well now, that's a hell of a way to treat a man's bright idea. But Jackass still tried to be friendly about it. After a few minutes of hard thinking he said, "Well, all right. I'll make it a *black* horse then.

SHE-DUDE SHUT UP

Scar No Shame To Cinco

AT BRANDING time on a Dude Ranch, the dang dudes manage to make a dang site more noise than the critters being branded. Cinco Smith had just singed a old cow with a hot iron, when a bustly female exclaimed, "Oh, that poor cow! I don't blame it for struggling and bawling; I can imagine how the poor creature feels."

Then to Cinco, she stormed, "You big brute! How would you feel if you had to carry a disfiguring scar on your hip for the rest of your life?"

"Well, ma'am, I guess I ain't got the imagination you have," replied Cinco. "Personally, carrying such a scar wouldn't bother me none, because I never appear in public without'n my pants."

PUBLIC NOTICE

ATTENTION, Customers! You folks needn't come into my store aiming to buy no crackers. I ain't selling none this week on account of my old she-cat got into the cracker barrel yesterday. Of course, that ain't unusual, because the cat always sleeps in the crackers. But yesterday was different; she crawled in there and left a mess of kittens. And of course you all know that handling young kittens is bad for them, so you folks who need crackers will just have to wait until them kittens has their eyes open and is able to crawl out of the barrel by theirselves.

Yours respy,
Short-weight Weston.
Proprietor, as well as
Vice-President of Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Cats.

FLEETING FAME

But Widow Welcomes News

WHEN Professor Hoenshall announced discovery of the remains of a Prehistoric Man, all the menfolks was happy. Them things is scarce as feathers on a mule, you know, and it looked like Cactus City would get famous.

But a Real Good Time and Liquid Celebration over getting famous was nipped in the bud when the Professor announced he had made a mistake. Them buzzard-picked remains wasn't a Prehistoric Man atall, they was only what was left of old Singletree Sinclair.

This was awful disappointing, of course, to everybody but Mrs. Sinclair. She was right glad to have some news of her husband as she had been sort of wondering where he was these last six months. She'd been afraid that something awful had happened to him, like being put in jail.

PINOCHLE PRIZE

Ladies Laugh—But Not Last

THE Ladies of The Ladies Aid sure had theirselfs a laugh the other night when Concha Conran won first prize at their Whist and Pinochle party. They laughed because the prize was a book—and Concha can't read, which was a very good joke the Ladies thought.

However, it seems to me that the joke is on the Ladies, because reading ain't the only thing you can use a book for. For instance, if the book has a leather cover, you can strop a razor on it. Or if it's heavy enough, you can use it to prop open a door or throw at the dog.

And when it comes right down to cases, a book is even better than a Mail Order Catalogue for starting a fire and other household uses because M.O. Catalogues have such dang thin paper in them these days.

So after all, I think the joke is on the Ladies, because Concha will get a dang site more use and pleasure out'n that book than if he could read it.

EDITORIAL

IT SEEMS like every year about this time, folks start to hollering about hard times. But hell, things is more prosperous now than ever before. For instance, take the political situation: It used to be that votes could be bought for a five-cent cigar and a shot of red-eye. But at the last election, votes brought as high as a dollar a piece—in cash.

Also look at the banking business: Money-bag Boggs says that when he took over the bank a few years ago, the bank was scarcely lending any money a tall to the ranchers. But now—well, there ain't a ranch in the county but what has at least a first and second mortgage on it. So you can see for yourselfs that Business as well as Politics is booming.

And if that ain't proof enough, let me tell you what I saw the other day up in Hungry Valley, where them sod-busting nesters is turning perfectly good range land grass-side down: I saw a jackrabbit running across the prairie and nobody was chasing it.

COMES CLEAN

Showy 'Stache Shaved

FOLKS was mighty surprised when Longhorn Logan cut off them long mustaches of his; he had as pretty a set of lip whiskers as you would see in a two-day ride. When asked why he cleaned off the brush, Longhorn allowed that it was on account of the owls.

Yeah, that sounds loco, but Longhorn explained that in order to keep his mustache looking trim, he had to put wax on it. And the wax drew flies, which was very bothersome. Worse than that, every time he sat down the dang lizards would come crawling over him to catch the flies that was feeding on the wax that held his mustache.

But when owls started to roost on his hat brim, waiting for the lizards to come catch the flies, Longhorn got sore and cut off his whiskers. Them owls, he said, was plumb ruining his hat.

SOCIAL NEWS

Or Maybe It's Unsocial

THE Cactus City Ladies Harmonica and Zither Club hardly got organized before it got disorganized. Or maybe it got disorganized first, I dunno. Anyways, at the first meeting yesterday, the ladies all voted for who was going to be President and Treasurer, which same was done without difficulty.

The next thing however, was to elect some Honest Lady to count the votes, and that is where they ran into trouble. After taking sixteen ballots nobody had got a majority. And the latest report, on the sixty-odd ballot, is that every one of the Ladies is still getting one vote apiece.

GENUINE JEWELRY

Maybe Not Gold But It Glitters

ANOTHER new business has been established in Our Fair City! (which puts us three businesses ahead of Mesa Springs, the town where they still hang Mail Order Catalogues on the downhill side of a mesquite bush). This new establishment is the Genuine Jewelry Store, which will carry a full line of Jewelry, Man and Horse.

It will be a big convenience for folks to get their jewelry locally. Previously, you had to order by mail and then wait maybe a month or two to find out how bad you got gypped. But now you can do the same right here in town.

The Genuine Jewelry Store will specialize in wedding rings, which are guaranteed not to turn green inside of six months. Six months is plenty of time for you to find out if you are Happily Married or Happily Separated, and in either case it don't make no difference by that time whether the ring turns green.

The store also carries extra strong and heavy wedding rings made especially for Pessimists. This is a very bright idea, and economical. In case your marriage goes wrong, why the ring won't be a total loss because it is big and heavy enough to put in a bull's nose.

GREEN BRITCHES

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

He sprang as though catapulted, and drove a blow squarely into Dude's face.

The wearin' o' the green meant more to Pardner Smith than a lucky six-gun draw. It meant life or death.

"THEY is three kinds o' Irish," asserted one of the pair of new riders that the Silvertip O'Callahan cow outfit had taken on only the evening before—the one who had not made good and had just been fired. He must have known that he was saying the meanest, most spiteful thing when he snarled, "Three kinds o' Irish. Shanty, gutter, and sewer. And if anybody here don't like my pups, let him drown 'em!"

He was tall and lean and dark, dressed too well for any ordinary cow hand. Harn was the name that had been given to him by scraggly-bearded old Kiowa Tate, the O'Callahan range boss. His nickname was Dude. His hatchet-face showed black rage even in the twilight gloom that was engulfing the vicinity of the bunkhouse. As he finished speaking, he poised a ready hand near the butt of his holstered Colt six-gun.

The old ranch foreman and fourteen big O'C cowboys formed Dude Harn's audience. They exchanged narrowed glances. It was the other new

rider, the one who had made good, who went into action. Also tall and lean, he was fair rather than dark. He'd left his gun-belt on his bunk. He sprang as though catapulted, seized the Dude's gun wrist in his left hand and with his right fist drove a blow squarely into the Dude's face.

"Shanty, gutter, and sewer, eh?" he bit out as he struck. "I'm drivin' that back down your filthy throat!"

Somebody darted in and took Harn's gun, in order to make it an even match. They clinched and fell. They rolled and pummeled and hammered and tore and choked. Dude Harn kept swearing. The other saved his breath. And it was the silent man who, after some five minutes of this whirlwind fighting, arose to his feet the victor.

A cheer rose. A businesslike feminine voice cut it short.

"What does this mean, Kiowa?"

The cowboy who had won the battle half turned to see his new employer, Bets O'Callahan, walking briskly toward them. Bets was a slender young woman, with Irish-blue eyes and blue-black hair, and handsome rather than pretty. She had on a divided brown-corduroy skirt and tan shirtwaist, a milk-white Stetson hat and small russet boots.

"You know what I think of brawling, Kiowa," she said, and her voice was sharp. "Silvertip, my daddy, wouldn't have it when he was alive, and I won't have it now!"

The lanky and wizened range boss explained briefly. Dude Harn climbed to his feet and gave his erstwhile antagonist a look of blackest hate. Somebody dropped Harn's gun, unloaded now, back into its holster. After the defeated man had gone for his horse, Bets turned to the new cowboy who had made good—with a vengeance. Her voice was not sharp now. But it was by no means soft.

"Kiowa said you wouldn't give your name, except that you did tell him that they called you 'Pardner' back where you came from. I don't want men who won't give their names. But in your case I'm going to make an exception—for one reason. Kiowa says you're a top hand. You've got to have a name. Suppose we make it Smith? Pardner Smith. I see that your trousers and shirt are as nearly torn off as Harn's were. Got any others?"

Pardner Smith managed an awkward smile. "Haven't got any others." He corrected himself a little shamefacedly: "Believe I did win a couple shirts playin' poker with the boys last night. Pay-day long gone, you know."

"I see," Bets said. "Kiowa, get supper, then bring the buckboard and drive me to town. I've got to go anyway, and while I'm there I'll buy some pants for Pardner Smith. What size, Pardner?"

He told her. . . .

THE bunkhouse cook yelled in at dawn, as usual, and woke the range crew. The new man was stiff and sore. He had a cut in either lip, one eye was in mourning, and both sets of knuckles were skinned. As he sat up in his underwear, a big-nosed cowboy nicknamed Snoot Roby tumbled to the floor nearby and began to talk.

"Some bunged up, Pardner, huh? But you danged nigh killed Dude Harn. Irish yoreself, mebbe, huh?" No response. Snoot ran on: "Dude Harn struck me as bein' one bad hombre, cowboy. Better keep a sharp eye out for a few days. He hain't none too good to dry-gulch you. Huh?"

Still no response. Old Kiowa Tate called back: "Pardner, you was asleep when I got in last night. New britches is under yore bunk."

Smith put on one of the shirts he had won at cards, then reached under his bunk and dragged out of loose wrapping-paper a pair of trousers. Snoot Roby looked at them and grinned: "Hell, pardner, them britches is *green!*"

Other riders crowded around. Some-

body laughed. Kiowa Tate came and had a close look. "Say, danged ef them britches ain't green, Pardner, as shore as hell! Old Isaacs gits his clothin' in job lots from K. C., and a heap of it is freaks. I—I wonder, now! Green is a Irish color. In fack, it's *the* Irish color. Ef the O'Callahans wasn't Irish, they jest never was any Irish! Miss Bets, she picked the britches. You—er, you reckon—"

Pardner Smith laughed a queer laugh and interrupted. "It might be I'm elected to wear the national color as a reward for defendin' the national honor! Kiowa, is the lady boss much of a hand at playin' jokes?"

"We-e-ell, she ain't been," said Tate, sobering, "but she's a heap like old Silvertip was, and he shore did like his dry joke. Y'ort to knowed Silvertip O'Callahan, Pardner. Big and upstandin', with a heavy mop o' hair as white as silver. Say—now that the daylight is gittin' better, them britches is gittin' greener! Don't you lay down on the range and go to sleep, or some cow brute'll eat you up thinkin' yo're grass! Pardner, are you aimin' to wear 'em?"

"I sure am," Pardner said, blue eyes twinkling. "Go right ahead and laugh, boys—you're all dyin' to, I can see." He was drawing on the trousers as he spoke. "I'll help you laugh. All together now, to the tune of 'Wearin' of the Green'—

"Haw-haw-haw-haw, haw-haw-haw-haw,
Haw-haw, haw-haw, haw-haw!
Haw-haw-haw-haw, haw-haw-haw-haw—
'The Wearin' of the Green!'"

The bunkhouse rocked with it. The wizened old cook appeared in the doorway that led into the leanto cookshack, and yelled: "Come and throw this grub into yore faces, or I'll do it, you ring-tailed rannihans!"

BIG-NOSED SNOOT ROBY paired off with Smith after breakfast. As they rode toward the range, Snoot spoke in confidential tones:

"Seen that bow-legged Pothooks Dentler, which don't talk much? Shore, you seen him. Well, he talked a heap to me last night. He knows that there Dude Harn jigger. Said Harn had done a hitch in the state pen for a stickup, and was wanted right now for another one. Said Dude was part Injun, and meaner'n ten sidewinders. You keep yore eye peeled anywhere you go, Pardner. He might try to dry-gulch you. And say—mind whisperin' it to me how come you ain't tellin yore proper name, cowboy?"

Smith grinned, white teeth flashing. "Two reasons why I won't, Snoot, and either one is plenty, and neither one is likely what you think it is," he said, and then went on, in a low voice: "Look back careful, compadre. Our lady boss is standin' there at the big corral with Kiowa, and they're both watchin' us. Wonder why?"

Roby shook his head. The two rode on.

BACK at the big corral, Bets O'Callahan was saying to her ranch foreman: "Kiowa, the Pardner cowboy's new trousers look green from here. Are they?"

"The greenest green," answered old Tate, "that ever was on earth. A whoopin', shoutin', p'izen green. He sawta thought, mebbe, that you was playin' a odd kind o' joke on him, ma'am."

"Joke?" The girl's smile was a little wry. "It's on me, if it's a joke, Kiowa. The light in Isaacs' store last night was dim, and maybe I'm a mite colorblind. I thought the trousers were blue!"

THE day passed. There had been an unusual rush of work on the big O'C spread, and the weary crew went to bed early. But on the next day there wasn't so much to do, and

Kiowa Tate did not start his men rangeward until after sunrise.

As before, Pardner Smith left the horse corral paired off with Snoot Roby. The two had ridden scarcely fifty yards when the voice of Bets O'Callahan stopped them. They half turned in their saddles and saw the girl coming from the ranch house in the company of a big, squat man, who was a good deal over-dressed, and who walked as though he were a person of great importance. The rest of the crew, also, reined down, and sat their horses watching. Kiowa Tate swore under his breath.

"Come here, Pardner," the girl called.

He rode back and dismounted before his employer and the squat man. He saw that the fellow had a gleaming nickel-plated badge pinned on the front of his too-fancy vest. Bets introduced them.

"Pardner Smith, this is the Hartsville sheriff's chief deputy, Bunt Sams."

The two men nodded. "Smith," began Sams, importantly. "You can consider yoreself under arrest on the charge o' robbery and cold-blooded murder. I'll take yore hardware."

He had his own hardware out and leveled before he finished speaking. His high-and-mighty air amused the cowboy. Bets O'Callahan said: "It happened last night, Pardner. Can you make an alibi?"

"Why, I reckon not, ma'am," was the drawled answer. "The crew slept like dead men last night, me among 'em. I *could* 'a' snuck out and done that, I guess, though I sure didn't. Sams, who was it that I'm supposed to have killed and robbed?"

"Old rancher over on Skeleton Fork, six miles from here," the chief deputy said brusquely, "name o' Creepy Jennison. Had a fuss with the Hartsville bank two years ago, and since then he'd been keepin' his *dinero* in an old rattletrap safe in his house. Like you didn't know! Well, Smith, you goin' to gimme that gun, or not?"

"Don't be a fool, cowboy," said Bets.

Pardner surrendered his Colt. Deputy Sams thrust it snugly behind his belt, reached for manacles and snapped them over the cowboy's wrists. "There," said Bunt Sams, "I sorta expected trouble with you. You was as meek as a baby lamb."

"Sure," replied Pardner. "I'm helpin' you make a complete locoed fool o' yourself, windbag."

The officer scowled and began a swift search of his prisoner's clothing for a knife or a hideout gun. Smith's ears caught a low, angry rumble that had come from the throats of the still watching range crew and foreman. When he had fought in defense of the good Irish name, O'Callahan, he certainly had won his spurs here.

Then Bunt Sams drew from a hip pocket of Pardner Smith's very green breeches a flattened thick roll of money. He stepped back a little, straightened the roll, and saw that each and every one of the bills was of large denomination.

"Around eight hundred dollars," he crowed. "Any doubt about it now, Miss Bets?"

"Yeah, a heap!" yelled big-nosed Snoot Roby. "Anybody ort to be able to see that Pardner ain't no ord'nary run-o'-the-range cowpoke, like Kiowa Tate jest said! I betcha he's a Ranger, or somethin', and—"

The girl was speaking now. "Can you explain that money, Pardner?"

"Well," he said, "maybe I could. But if you don't mind, ma'am, I'll just let this stuckup deputy go ahead and make a fool of himself. All right, Sams, let's go and see what your jail looks like."

HE PUT his manacled hands on the horn of his saddle, and the next second was astride his long-legged cow horse. Gun ready, Sams followed to his own horse which

trailed rein near a ranch house gallery. Soon officer and prisoner were riding together toward the county seat.

"Mind tellin' me why you just had to pick on me?" asked Smith.

"No, now that I've got you, I don't," said Bunt. "That robber and killer was seen by two o' old Creepy Jennison's cow hands as he made his getaway in the light o' the livin' room lamp. He had on green britches."

"Green britches—" Pardner echoed, in amazement.

"Yeah, green britches," triumphantly repeated Chief Deputy Bunt Sams. "Old Isaacs swears he didn't have but just them that he sold Miss Bets for you. Only such britches that ever has been seen anywhere around here. Them two Jennison cow hands is straight, and the court—er, if it gets to court—will respect what they say. You're in a tight hole, Mister Pardner Smith!"

The cowboy was extremely sober now. He really was in a tight hole! Not very long afterward he heard himself muttering: "Sams, do you know a jigger named Dude Harn?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"If what I've understood about Harn is correct," Pardner said, "the Jennison business would be a heap in his line."

Bunt Sams agreed to that. "But," he growled, "the Dude ain't got any green britches."

Pardner Smith was lodged in a corner cell of the low-roofed jail building which stood on a back corner of the courthouse lot. Peering through the small, barred windows, he could see the townsmen and strange cowboys gathering in knots here and there along the street and in doorways, and he could guess what they were talking about.

"Don't worry, cowboy," grizzled old Sheriff George Home told him. "No mob ain't yet took a prisoner from me and strung him up."

"Good record," Pardner said. "But there's always a first time. They think I murdered an old man."

LATE that afternoon, Smith heard a rattle of high-heeled boots in the jail corridor and he turned to the iron-latticed cell door to see scraggly-bearded Kiowa Tate and Snoot Roby coming toward his cell. Tate began at once:

"Them O'Callahans," he whispered to Smith, "has allus stuck by their boys. Miss Bets sent me and Snoot in to see what was what. She didn't know, o' course, about this mob gatherin,' which is gittin' thicker every minute, or likely she'd 'a' sent the whole crew. She suggested that you might quit bein' a butt-headed fool and tell us what yore name is and where you got all o' the *dinero*. All right, cowboy, I'm listenin'!"

"She don't think I'm guilty?" asked Pardner.

"He-e-e-ell, no. Says you ain't the kind ay-tall. Ef Pothooks Dentler is right about the Dude Harn jigger, then he's the one hombre in this county who's lowdown enough to kill and rob a pore old man, even ef he don't wear no green britches. Pardner, listen. That danged mob out there on the streets is quiet, which is shore a bad sign. I'll bring in the Big O'C crew, and we'll shore put up a scrap fer you, but it'll mean a heap o' bloodshed and they'll git you in the end anyhow—yeah, string you up. Now Pardner, come on and talk before it's too late!"

Smith was a little pale. His blue eyes were narrow, and too bright. He replied: "Kiowa, I got that money at home, in another state. I was a wildcat and a rambler. Not lowdown, never. One day my daddy handed me a roll twice as big as the one Bunt Sams took off o' me, and says:

" 'Here, kid, take this and get out and have yourself one more hi-yu big ramble, and get the wildcat stuff out

o' your system, and then come back home and settle down. Okay, kid?'

"And," Smith went on, low-voiced, "I told my daddy, okay. Well as for my name, it's as good a name as O'Callahan, and I won't drag it in the dirt. If I'm hung, nobody'll know that name was hung. I hope you can understand that, Kiowa! Wouldn't do any good to tell the mob, or even a law court, not with that sure-fire green britches evidence against me. Say—you Snoot, step closer. I want to whisper somethin' in your ear."

The big-nosed puncher pressed against the iron-latticed cell door. So did Pardner Smith. Pardner whispered, "I've just reached through and took your gun, Snoot! You can swear you didn't know. Bunt Sams didn't bother to make me shed my cartridge-belt, so I'm heeled."

Roby grinned, drew another Colt from inside his shirt and dropped it into the holster that Smith had just emptied, then whispered back, "Meant to sneak this 'un in to you, but it's all the same thing. Mebbe you'll find yore hawss standin' ready, little ways down the alley back there, soon as dark comes. Huh, cowboy?"

"Took the words right out o' my mouth," breathed Smith, as he put Snoot's gun inside his shirt to hide it. Kiowa grinned: "Me, I'm ridin' hell-fer-leather after the Big O'C crew, jest in case. Luck, Pardner!"

He and Roby hurried away.

THE sun went down. Night came on. From his small, barred windows Smith could see that the grim, silent mob was still thickening along the dim streets. He could hear the voice of grizzled Sheriff George Home, in his office at the front of the jail building, as he swore in special deputies for guarding the new prisoner. Home's voice had a decidedly worried ring now, Pardner noted.

Then a match flared in the corridor, and the small, wall lamp gave out yellowish light. A moment later, Deputy Bunt Sams came with supper for Smith. He put it down near the cell door, took out his gun and a large key, unlocked the door and kicked it open. As he bent to shove the tinplate and tincup into the cell with his foot, the barrel of Roby's Colt fell hard upon his sleek-combed head, and he crumpled like a boiled rag.

"Sorry, windbag, but I had to do it," Pardner muttered uselessly, and then was gone into the alleyway.

He found his horse where he had expected to find it. Since nobody knew of his escape as yet, and since the unusual color of his trousers did not show in the early darkness, he rode across two vacant lots and onto a thinly populated residence street without having been challenged.

Smith had been in the Hartville section long enough to have heard of the badlands that lay to the westward. This semi-desert was, for him, the nearest refuge. He wasn't going to run far. He had to clear himself. And he had another reason for going into the badlands. They offered an easy refuge for old Creepy Jennison's murderer, too.

Dude Harn? Smith believed so. It wasn't based on hunch. Of all the men in the county, Harn was the most capable of robbing and killing an old man, Pardner had been told. But—what of the green breeches thing?

There Pardner was stuck.

AT THE close of his first hard day in the semi-desert, he found food for himself and grass for his horse at the isolated *jacal* of a Mexican renegade, the one human being he had seen in his search so far. On the next day, Smith sponged lightly upon a wizened prospector. The prospector knew of no other badlands inhabitants. But there was an ancient shanty a dozen miles northward, near a waterhole, and it was just possible that somebody was living there now.

Pardner rode into sight of the sun-blasted old shack the next day at noon. Thin grass grew around the edge of the stagnant little pond, and there was a raw-boned horse staked there. Pardner dismounted a respectable distance off and stole toward the shack on foot, keeping always to the cover of pear clumps and bowlders.

Soon he was gluing an eye to a crack in the nearer wall. Inside, asleep on the earthen floor, lay a tall, lean, sun-bitten man of about forty, and close beside him lay two heavy gun-belts. Then Pardner choked back a gasp of sheerest amazement.

The man inside had on green breeches!

Smith eased back the hammer of the Roby gun, glanced quickly about him, and saw no living thing except his horse and the raw-boned roan at the water-hole. He cautiously tip-toed to the doorway of the shack. Although he had made no sound, the man inside was sitting up and reaching for one of his Colts.

"Let her be," clipped Pardner, his own Colt menacing.

The other obeyed. Pardner stepped in, caught up the pair of gun-belts and tossed them into a corner. The unknown, he saw now, had the coldest of pale-blue eyes, and a hard, thin mouth.

"Who the merry hell, pilgrim," the unknown growled, "are you?"

"I'm somebody with green britches on, same as you," Smith flung back. "Where'd you get yours?"

"None o' yore damn business. Where'd you git yores?"

Pardner grinned, though his voice was hard: "I'll be accommodatin', and take you and show you where mine came from. You can see the whole store from any o' the jail windows. Now dig up the Creepy Jennison dinero, hurry out and saddle up, and we'll start."

The desert man gaped and blinked as though he didn't understand.

"It won't work," Pardner said sharply, and elevated the muzzle of his gun a little. "Dig up the Jennison dinero and hustle out—"

Pardner Smith was no coward. Neither was he a fool. He broke off short, and dropped his six-gun, for the very good reason that he'd suddenly found himself looking straight into the barrel of another six-gun. It had come sneaking around an edge of the doorway, and beyond the sights there was the rattlesnake-mean, glittering dark eye of Dude Harn!

"Sensible," the Dude snarled, and stepped in, his Colt still leveled and ready. He was not wearing the trousers that he'd had so nearly torn off in his rough-and-tumble fight with the other new O'Callahan outfit cowboy, the one who had made good—with a vengeance. The trousers that Harn had on now were blue.

"Sensible," he repeated, with abysmal hate showing in his mean eyes. "You'll git to live longer, smart cowpoke. Until you starve to death, anyhow. I been trailin' you two hours, smart cowpoke. You other hombre there, git up and find ropes and hog-tie this jigger double and treble. Jump!"

Smith paled at the thought of lying here bound hand and foot until he died of slow starvation. But it seemed better than sudden death, so he remained motionless and silent—until Dude Harn said:

"Shore did take up for the Irish, didn't you, smart cowpoke?" he leered. He spat at the cowboy. "Well, they *is* three kinds o' Irish, like I said. Three kinds. Shanty, gutter, and sewer!"

Pardner Smith saw the leering face of Dude Harn through a blood-red mist. He forgot all except that hateful face. He sprang straight at grim death, sprang like an enraged puma. The Dude's gun exploded, but Pardner had ducked, thereby reducing his injury to a mere shoulder burn—and

then he was tearing the smoking Colt out of Harn's grip, leaping back to bash the third man against a wall, and yelling:

"Freeze, both o' you—move one hair and I'll burn you down!"

They froze instantly. Smith made Harn turn his back, and ran a hand swiftly over his clothing. "No hideout gun, Dude? Surprised at you!"

Still with a keen eye on Harn, he went over the clothing of the tall, lean, sun-bitten man. "No hideout on you, either. You goin' to dig up that Jennison dinero for me, or not?"

"I dunno what yo're talkin' about!"

"All right." Pardner shrugged. "I'll not argue it with you. You, Harn, listen. I don't play hunches much, but we'll say I'm playin' one now. You and the long jigger there, swap britches, you blue one for his green ones, and never mind why. Hustle—and I mean hustle!"

They did it grumblingly, but they did it.

WITHIN ten minutes, Pardner Smith was astride his cow horse with two gun-belts about his middle, and two more draped from the horn of his saddle, riding eastward. Ahead of him rode the crestfallen, wondering pair that he had captured in the shack.

Around mid-afternoon they began to see steers that carried the Silvertip O'Callahan brand. A little later they caught the attention of four O'C cowboys, one after another. One of these Smith sent to Hartsville for Sheriff George Home.

The sun was an hour high when old Foreman Kiowa Tate hastened to the ranch house and called Miss Bets O'Callahan out. "Look who's comin'!" cried Tate, and pointed off northwestward. The girl's blue eyes rounded as she recognized all but one of the little cavalcade. Soon they were drawn up a short distance away. Pardner Smith ordered the three cowboys to keep a sharp eye on the two captives, then slipped from his sadle and approached Bets with his tousled head bared.

"You'll notice, ma'am," he said, grinning, flicking a glance toward the now hard scowling Dude Harn, "that there was more than one pair o' green britches!"

He had thought that he was bringing her a little surprise. It worked the other way around.

"Of course," quickly said Bets. "I certainly wouldn't expect any rider of mine to get along with only one pair of pants! I bought two pairs for you—don't believe I mentioned that fact to Kiowa—thinking they were blue, there in the dim light of old Isaacs' store."

"Blue—you—you did?" Smith felt a little silly.

"I did. Funny I didn't remember this in conection with the robbery and killing until after you'd escaped jail," she went on. "It's plain to me now, and will be to you, I guess. Dude Harn rode back and slipped into the bunkhouse after you were all asleep, looking for clothing to replace the clothing you'd almost torn off him, and naturally he found that second pair of green pants. Then he went to Creepy Jennison's. See, don't you?"

"Sure," Smith said. "But Dude didn't know they was green until he saw 'em in the light at Jennison's, or maybe not until the next day. Then he swapped 'em off to that desert hombre. Too short for the desert jigger, which made me certain that he hadn't bought 'em himself. Harn has got the Jennison dinero in a belt around his waist inside—I located it while I was supposed to be lookin' for a hideout gun!"

The Dude had been listening to all that. He wilted fast. His reputation would rivet the crime on him, if there was any doubt, and he knew it. Soon the Hartsville sheriff came, with two deputies and Snoot Roby—who grinned delightedly as he gave Smith

the news to the effect that erstwhile Chief Deputy Bunt Sams had lost his job through incompetence. When the officers had ridden townward with their prisoners, the half-starved Pardner was invited, along with Kiowa Tate, to have supper with Bets in the ranch house. Kiowa wisely vanished the moment the meal was over. Then Smith and the lone daughter of the late Silvertip had a showdown.

"Pardner," began Bets, her voice businesslike, "Kiowa told me about you, about your father giving you money for a last hi-yu big ramble, after which you were to go back home and settle down. But you wouldn't tell us your name before you got into this scrape! And there's another thing that puzzles me. With all the money you had—evidently you're the son of a well-to-do cattleman—why were you working on the Big O'C for just common range wages?"

Pardner Smith arose to his feet and stood there idly turning his big gray Stetson on one finger. "I'm goin' to tell you, ma'am, and then you're goin' to run me off. But first I'll tell you about my name. If I'd told you at the start, you sure would 'a' thought I was tryin' to run the biggest kind of a sandy on you. You sure would. All right, listen, ma'am:

"It wasn't only for you—though it was a heap on your account—that I pitched into Dude Harn for his rank insult to the good old Irish that evenin'. You will understand when I do tell you who I am. My full, entire name is Michael Patrick O'Fallon!"

Bets gasped, then laughed for a long time. O'Fallon misunderstood it, a little. Somehow desperately, as awkwardly as a boy, he pursued: "And here's where you run me off o' the old Big O'C, ma'am. I saw you in town one day last week, and was simply stuck to death on you, and I got a job here because—well. I was hopin', sort of—hopin'—Aw, thunder, Miss Bets. I'll take it like a man. You don't owe me a centavo, and thanks for them damned green britches!"

He started down the gallery steps. "Wait, cowboy!" It was an order not a request. "You were to go back home and settle down. This is a good country. Maybe you'd like to settle here. Keep riding for this outfit while you're thinking the matter over."

A week afterward, Mike Pat O'Fallon wired his father in Texas:

AM SETTLING HERE HER NAME IS OCALLAHAN IF ANY OBJECTIONS GO TO HELL.

He had the prompt answer:

NO OBJECTIONS YOU DAMNED FOOL HER NAME BEING OCALLAHAN MOTHER AND ME COMING HELL BENT FOR WEDDING WHEN IS IT

"How old Silvertip would have loved that." Observed Kiowa Tate.

DON'T CROWD A COWMAN

By Gunnison Steele

The horse bucked wildly when he hit the quicksand.

There's more ways to kill a two-legged skunk, thought Pecos Buck, than to shoot it in the yellow stripe that runs down the back of that particular variety.

CALVES are unpredictable creatures; they do funny things sometimes. But they don't run away from their mamas, sneak into a gent's corral, and close the gate behind them.

That's why old Pecos Buck's squinty eyes flared wide with surprise when he saw the four suckling-age calves penned in the pole corral behind his cabin, and the four circling, bawling cows. It was the persistent bawling of the cows that had jarred the wiry, gray-bearded oldster from sound sleep and brought him out, minus boots and trousers.

Pecos looked at the capering calves, at the circling cows, and quick apprehension stabbed at him.

"Damn Jack Dark's tricky soul!" he muttered, and dove back inside the cabin.

Hastily, he donned boots and trousers and lunged back outside, strapping a gunbelt about his skinny waist as he made for the corral. Those calves didn't belong to him; he hadn't placed them in the corral. They were unbranded, bore no earmarks. But the circling cows wore Jack Dark's Coffin brand.

Pecos didn't waste time wondering how the calves had got into his corral. He swung open the gate, dove inside, and hazed the calves outside to their mothers. Then he heaved a sigh of relief, and thought, "Just about now I ought to be havin' some visitors!"

Hoofbeats sounded just then, and a couple of horsemen swung over the brow of a hill a hundred yards away and galloped swiftly toward the corral. One of the riders was big, dark-visaged, with a hooked nose, and inky, predatory eyes. The other was a gaunt, thin-faced, buck-toothed gent. Pecos Buck wasn't surprised at the riders' appearance, nor at seeing they were Jack Dark and his gunslick foreman, Joe Quirt.

The two Coffin riders came on toward the corral gate and pulled their broncs to a halt a few feet from where Peces stood. Jack Dark looked at the suckling calves, then back at Pecos Buck, a sneering, ugly grin twitching his dark features.

"What the hell, Buck!" Jack Dark said harshly. "Them calves there belong to me. What yuh doin' with them in yore corral?"

"I know damn well them calves belong to you, Dark," Pecos Buck said, trying to keep his voice from showing the fierce resentment and anger that rioted through him. "I know they was in my corral—and you know blasted well I didn't put 'em there! When my iron gets hot, I won't be crazy enough to go out and drive some suckin' calves away from their mamas."

The big Coffin rancher looked down at Pecos Buck, and Pecos saw that his cruel, black eyes held no pupils, just pin-points of black flame.

"What yuh mean by that, you ol' coot?" he purred.

"Hell, Dark, why beat about the bush?" Pecos asked bluntly. "You put them critters in my pen, or had it done, hopin' to ride up and catch 'em there and make folks think I stole 'em. But I was too quick for yuh. You'll have to try somethin' else."

Jack Dark didn't say anything for a moment—just sat there and looked at the defiant oldster, his wolfish features tight and still, as if turning some evil question in his mind, his long fingers toying with the ivory handle of the gun he wore. Joe Quirt was grinning, his buck-teeth gleaming like a dog's fangs. A chill crept over Pecos Buck. He knew he was close to death.

But, obviously, Jack Dark thought better of it, for he smiled suddenly, and his hand came away from his gun.

"You're crazier than I thought, Buck," he said softly. "Lots of folks would make a killin' matter outa this. They say I'm hard, merciless, but it's a good thing for you it ain't so. But I ain't got no use for nesters who slap a hot iron on every maverick they run across, no more than other honest cowmen. These ain't the first calves I've missed, and I'm gettin' damned tired of it. I was lucky enough to miss these in time to trail them down, before they got an iron slapped on 'em. But I'm warnin' yuh, right now: I've stood about all I aim to from you. Here's my advice, take it or leave it: Get the hell offa this two-bit outfit, and stay!"

Pecos Buck fought back the bitter, helpless rage that was storming through him. He knew that if he

started a fight, they'd kill him. He wasn't afraid to die, but death would mean bitter and utter failure. And he felt that, even in his grave, he'd know the arrogant, ruthless Jack Dark was living off the fruits of his slavery.

He looked Jack Dark straight in the eye, and his voice was steady, calm. "I'm givin' you skunky gents the same advice yuh just gave me," he said levelly. "Get the hell offa my land, and stay! Mebby I cain't fight you and yore under-hand tricks, but long as the Double O belongs to me, by hell, I kin keep such polecats as you two from smellin' it up. Now git, or I'll have the law on yuh!"

"The law?" Jack Dark grinned sneeringly, and looked at Joe Quirt. "I'm the law in this country. I run things."

"You don't run me," Pecos Buck said flatly.

Joe Quirt grinned, his slim fingers caressing the black butts of his guns. "You want me to show this ol' coot who runs things, Jack?" he purred.

"He'll find out, soon enough," Dark said. His sable eyes bored into Pecos Buck's. "Yuh better remember what I said, nester. You won't be so lucky, next time!"

Jack Dark suddenly whirled the big bay he rode and, followed by Joe Quirt, spurred savagely away.

"Might be a good idea to remember somethin' else, too," the Coffin rancher flung back over his shoulder. "Sometimes, gents in this country are found with bullet holes in 'em!"

"Yeah, in their backs!" Pecos yelled derisively after him.

BUT Pecos Buck didn't feel in a facetious frame of mind. Jack Dark was trying to force him off his little spread, like he'd forced out other small ranchers, by treacherous and ruthless methods.

And it wasn't easy to fight Jack Dark. During the last few years, as Jack Dark rose to power in the Los Lunas country, ranch houses had been burned to the ground, ranchers shot in the back, cattle stolen and killed.

Pecos Buck wasn't afraid of being dry-gulched. For Jack Dark respected grim old sheriff Bill Raven, who was Pecos Buck's friend. But Pecos was getting old. This little Double O outfit, which bordered Dark's Coffin spread on the south, was all he had. It wasn't much of an outfit, but it meant a hell of a lot to Pecos Buck. It meant a place to stay where he wouldn't have to be a bother to folks when he got too old and stove-up to fork a bronc, a place to play out his string in peace.

The Double O was little, but it had good grass and water. Jack Dark wanted it. Pecos had missed cattle. His fences had been cut, his haystacks burned. Other discouraging things had happened. Pecos knew that Jack Dark was doing these things, trying to force him out. Pecos had hung on grimly, hoping for a break.

Finally, he'd gone to sheriff Bill Raven with his troubles. Pecos and Bill Raven had been sidekicks back in their younger days. But Bill Raven hadn't been able to help Pecos much. So far, Jack Dark had been too cunning and too powerful for the old lawman to pin anything onto him. He couldn't jail Jack Dark without positive evidence that he'd broken the law.

Now, Jack Dark was showing just how snaky and treacherous he really was. He was trying to frame Pecos Buck into the open, so he wouldn't have any trouble grabbing the Double O. Thirty years ago, Pecos Buck wouldn't have asked odds of Jack Dark's Coffin gang. With powder-smoke and hot head, he'd have answered Jack Dark's ultimatum to "Get out—or die!"

But now, Pecos was getting old. All he asked was a chance to spend his remaining years in peace on the little place he had worked hard to build up. He'd held back from an open fight

with Jack Dark, hoping everything would turn out all right. From now on, however, after Jack Dark's attempt at framing him, he knew he'd have to be on his guard. . . .

BUT, when Jack Dark struck again, Pecos Buck was caught flat-footed. It happened with such bewildering suddenness, that the wiry oldster had no chance to fight back.

It happened a week after Pecos had found the four calves inside his corral. Pecos was sitting on his cabin porch, watching the sun set in a wild blaze of color toward the blue hills, when he saw four horsemen riding in across the alkali sink below the cabin. Pecos didn't move, but his heart felt like a cold gust of wind had washed against it. Pecos Buck had a lot of friends in the Los Lunas country, but they didn't ride in to visit him in groups of four. Besides, he recognized these four.

One of the riders was sheriff Bill Raven. The others were Jack Dark, Joe Quirt and a squat, tow-headed Coffin rider named Bart Flint. The four rode up to the cabin, stopped their broncs, and when Pecos looked at sheriff Bill Raven's grim, seamed face, he knew there was hell to pay. Sly triumph showed on Jack Dark's hawkish, predatory features. Joe Quirt and the squat puncher were grinning at Pecos Buck.

No one said anything for a moment, and that chill feeling deepened in Pecos Buck's heart. He knew, by the sly, vicious triumph in Jack Dark's inky eyes, that he was in for it.

"Light down, gents," Pecos invited slowly.

Then, he said to rawboned, gray-mustached old Bill Raven, "Bill, yuh look like a thunder-cloud. What's on yore mind?"

"Pecos," Bill said softly, "it hurts like hell to say it, I reckon you'll have to saddle yore bronc and ride into town with me. I've got to arrest yuh!"

Pecos didn't show any sign that he was worried. "Whatever in hell for?" he asked.

"Cattle stealin' and brand-blottin'. These gents here filed the charges a coupla hours ago. Joe Quirt and Bart Flint swore they saw you brandin' some maverick calves and butcherin' a Coffin steer. So I'll have to lock yuh up."

Pecos Buck got slowly to his feet. He wasn't surprised, but that didn't keep black anger from surging over him.

"Bill," he said angrily, "ain't you got sense enough to see that this's a rotten frame-up? I ain't run no hot iron nor butchered no Coffin steers. It's a trick of that polecat there to get me sent to the pen, so he kin glom onto the Double O. He tried it once before."

"Talkin' and bluff won't help this time, old man," Jack Dark cut in sneeringly. "We've got the goods on yuh!"

"What you mean, yuh got the goods on me?" Pecos blared. "Why, damn yore soul, Dark. . . ." The oldster bit off, looked at sheriff Bill Raven. "Where's the proof I done these things, Bill?" he asked.

"Quirt and Bart Flint said they hid in a ravine yesterday, watched you brand some Coffin calves, and butcher a Coffin steer," the old sheriff answered grimly. "They carried me over there and showed me the dead fire they said you made. Then, a few minutes ago, we rode by a bunch of yore stuff over there on the flats. In the bunch was three calves fresh-branded Double O—suckin' Coffin branded cows. Jack Dark claims them calves belong to him—and damned if it don't look mightily like it!"

A numb, helpless feeling had crept over Pecos Buck. He saw exactly what Jack Dark was up to. He had heard of such tricks being worked before. They

were simple, but effective as hell.

"If Coffin calves are in my herd, somebody else branded 'em and put 'em there," Pecos said helplessly. "Dang it, Bill, you got more sense than that. You know I didn't steal no calves. Looks like bein' the law so long has slowed yuh down considerable."

"I ain't the law," Bill Raven said slowly. "I just represent the law. And, unless you kin prove yore innocence, I've got tuh lock you up for trial."

"How about that steer hide?" Joe Quirt cut in slyly. "Me and Bart followed him yesterday after he butchered that steer, and saw him go into that shed over there with the hide. Mebby it wouldn't hurt to have a looksee."

Pecos Buck didn't say anything to that. He knew they wouldn't find any hide in that shed. But they did! Pecos watched bewilderedly as Bill Raven pried up a plank in the floor, and pulled out a fresh steer hide carrying Jack Dark's Coffin brand.

Bill Raven looked accusingly at Pecos, and Pecos didn't say anything. He didn't know what to say. He felt cold all over. He saw the gleam of vicious satisfaction in Jack Dark's eyes. He heard Bill Raven telling him to go saddle his bronc, that they'd be heading for town.

He knew then Jack Dark had him. He was licked. There was a discouraged droop to Pecos Buck's scrawny shoulders as he went about saddling his roan. . . .

SABLE shadows were racing across the plain by the time they started for Gunlock. They talked little as they rode through the darkness. Sheriff Bill Raven's bony features were as gray and sober as was Pecos Buck's. Occasionally, from the rear where Jack Dark was riding, Pecos thought he could hear sounds that sounded like Jack Dark chuckling. Joe Quirt and Bart Flint had left them and ridden northward toward the Coffin outfit.

Bill Raven had taken Pecos' gun, but he hadn't hand-cuffed him. It wouldn't have been hard for Pecos Buck to jab spurs to the roan and get away from his captors. But he didn't try it. He didn't mind going to jail so much, Pecos told himself. It was thoughts of losing the Double O, of having it fall into Jack Dark's greedy hands, that made his blood boil with fierce anger.

Pecos kept telling himself everything was going to turn out all right, that Jack Dark couldn't railroad him to the pen for something he hadn't done. He was still a little bewildered. Not till the winking lights of Gunlock appeared on the plain ahead, did he realize fully the stark menace that confronted him.

The oldster's mind worked fast as they rode along Gunlock's rutted street toward the jail. Until now, he hadn't given much thought to trying to escape. But suddenly, he knew he'd rather die than spend the rest of his life in a prison cell. He tried to tell himself that he was too old to take to the owlhoot trails. Nevertheless, he knew that being an outlaw was a hell of a lot better than rotting behind steaming gray walls.

But now, it looked like he'd waited too long to think of escaping. Sheriff Bill Raven and Jack Dark stopped and dismounted before the frame building that served as sheriff's office and jail. Bill Raven went toward the door of the office, like he expected Pecos to follow and be locked up. But Jack Dark, after he dismounted, stood and looked craftily up at Pecos Buck, grinning a little in a yellow shaft of light that came from a nearby window.

Bill Raven stopped in the doorway, looked back. "You gents come on inside," he called gruffly.

"You go on in and get this calf stealer's cell ready," Dark said. "I got

somethin' to say to him, then I'll bring 'im in."

Pecos Buck dismounted slowly, wild anger at the Coffin rancher's arrogant, sneering attitude storming through him. He sneaked a glance along the street. The street was deserted, and criss-crossed with streaks of murky light.

"You savvy what you're up against, Buck?" Jack Dark asked, his voice hard. "Once a cell door shuts behind you, you ain't got a chance. You'll rot behind bars. You savvy that, don't you?"

"So what?" Pecos asked flatly.

"So this," the Coffin Rancher went on softly. "I'm givin' you a chance to go free. I ain't a hard man; I don't want to see an old gent like you go to the pen. You give me yore word to pull up and get plumb outa the country, and I'll withdraw them charges against you. There won't be anything else to it."

"Is that all?" Pecos asked.

"Not quite all," Jack Dark said, and grinned slyly. "Before you go, you sign the Double O over to me. It ain't worth much—not worth as much as yore life, is it?"

"Mebby it ain't. The Double O—in exchange for my life." Pecos Buck paused, like he was turning Jack Dark's proposition over in his mind. Then he said, "Mebby it wouldn't be such a bad trade, at that. I'll do it, by hell! It's swell of you to give me this chance, Dark."

"Didn't I say I wasn't hard?" Jack Dark laughed, a greedy, triumphant sound. "Let's shake on it, then we'll go inside and tell Bill Raven the whole deal's off!"

Jack Dark stepped in close, his hand out-thrust. That was just what Pecos Buck had been waiting for. His wiry body jerked like a spring uncoiling, and with all the pent-up savagery of his hate and fury behind it, his flinty old fist blasted into the big man's face. Jack Dark grunted, reeled backward against the hitch-rack, shaking his head bewilderedly. Then, Pecos came rocketing in again, his fists beating a fierce tattoo against Dark's bleeding face.

The hitch rack kept Dark from going down. Obviously taken completely by surprise by the oldster's savage attack, he didn't try to fight back for a moment. He backed away from Pecos' flailing fists, stumbled over something, went sprawling in the dusty street. He rolled over and over in the dust, snarling like a startled cat, squalling at the top of his lungs for Bill Raven to come and help him. He kept rolling there in the street, arms up over his face, like he thought Pecos was still hitting him.

But Pecos Buck had lost interest in Jack Dark. He leaped back into the saddle, jabbed spurs into the roan and thundered back along the street. He flung a glance back over his shoulder, saw Jack Dark lunge to his feet; he saw a red tongue of flame lance out from Dark, heard a gun roar and the scream of a bullet past his head. He saw old Bill Raven plunge back into the street, heard him yelling at Jack Dark, asking him what had happened.

Then Gunlock lay behind him, and the roan was running hard along the trail to the south. A white moon had just soared above the horizon, spraying the plain with a weird gray light. Pecos let the roan run, fierce satisfaction in his heart. Maybe he'd lose the Double O, maybe he'd be a wanted man with a price on his head; but he wouldn't rot in the pen—and he'd had the satisfaction of lamming hell out of Jack Dark.

Far to the south, an inky blob in the moonlight, he could see the Los Lunas hills. Not far beyond these hills was old Mexico. Once in the rough hills, Pecos knew he'd be safe for a while, till he had a chance to slip on across the Border. But he knew he didn't have any time to lose in getting to the hills. Sheriff Bill Raven was his

friend; but, with Bill Raven, friendship came second to the law. In just a little while, the old lawman would be storming along Pecos Buck's backtrail at the head of a posse.

Pecos Buck rode on through the night in a wild race for the hills and safety.

BUT Pecos hadn't ridden more than three or four miles when a queer feeling came over him. He was glad to be out of Gunlock with its threat of jail; but the farther he rode across the dark plain, the heavier that leaden feeling in his heart became. All his life Pecos had hated weaklings and cowards. And now he was being a coward himself. He was running away from something that he knew damn well he ought to stay and fight. Like a whipped cur, he was scurrying wildly for safety without even trying to fight back at his tormenters.

Pecos slowed the roan, looked uneasily back over the dark prairie. Soon a posse would be storming along his backtrail. With the posse would be Jack Dark and some of his gunslick riders. Only they wouldn't try to take him back to jail; they'd try to leave him stretched cold and lifeless in some ravine. That sent fresh anger surging through old Pecos. He scowled in the darkness. He could remember a time when he wouldn't be running away like this from a gent who was crowding him.

Powdersmoke and lead would have been his answer then. But now he didn't have a gun. And, anyway, things had got to a spot where guns wouldn't help. Jack Dark was using trickery to gain his ends. And trickery had to be fought with trickery....

Pecos Buck slowed the roan to a walk. He rode slowly along, thinking hard. There must be some way of making old Bill Raven see through Jack Dark's treacherous game. It was up to Pecos Buck to find that way—but he couldn't do it by fogging, with his tail between his legs, toward the hills. There was a remedy for everything, Pecos had always said. Jack Dark's poisonous scheme had been hatched back there on the Double O—there also must lie the antidote.

Suddenly Pecos Buck slapped fist into palm. "I'll do it, by granny!" he muttered. "It's worth a try, anyway!"

Suddenly, he swung the roan into a cedar thicket, crouched there, and watched as Bill Raven's hastily recruited posse streamed past. He saw Jack Dark out in the lead with Sheriff Raven, the savage, eager look of a trailing dog on his swarthy face. Pecos waited a few minutes, then got back onto the roan and cut back toward the Double O, the east line of which lay no more than a couple of miles to the west.

He knew his strategy wouldn't fool Bill Raven very long. Then the posse would scatter. Some of them would back-trail. And that was the way Pecos wanted it.

At the edge of Double O ground he came to a shallow stream. He rode into the stream and followed it's course a mile before leaving it. Then he rode into a rocky little ravine, stopped, and unsaddled the roan. All he could do now was wait for dawn. Then, maybe, he'd find out just how wild and hopeless was the crazy plan that had turned him back from almost certain safety in the hills.

After a while, Pecos lay down, using the saddle for a pillow. Dawn was staining the eastern sky when he awoke....

DAWN brought two men prowling along the stream. Sounds of their horses' hoofs had jarred Pecos from sleep. When he looked over the rim of the ravine, they were no more than two hundred yards away. They'd been following the stream. But now they'd struck his trail, were following it toward the ravine.

A mist hovered over the stream; but

instantly Pecos recognized the two. One of them was Bill Raven—the other was Jack Dark.

Hastily, Pecos slapped leather onto the roan, mounted and slipped over the brush-rimmed wall of the ravine. He circled, keeping to the shelter of a thicket, and headed back toward the stream. But the running roan made a lot of racket. The two heard him, and headed in that direction.

Jack Dark's voice rose savagely, "There he is, in that cedar thicket. Let 'im have it!"

A rifle roared. A bullet snarled waspishly. Pecos fed steel to the roan and roared on toward the sandy-bedded creek. Dark's rifle blasted again, and again, the bullets hissing only inches from Pecos Buck's grizzled head.

Pecos heard Bill Raven bawl out, "Damn yuh, Dark, stop shootin'! He ain't got a gun—you tryin' to murder 'im?"

Throwing caution to the wind, Pecos spurred madly for the creek. He plunged over the mesquite-lined creek bank, sent the roan flying along its dry bed. The stream bed here was a hundred feet across. During the rainy season, it was filled from bank to bank with muddy water, but now there was only a tiny trickle between holes along the center of the channel. On each side of the stream was an expanse of sand and sun-dried mud.

Pecos Buck's eyes, knifing desperately along the stream, focused suddenly on a section of the creek bed. This creek was on Double O land, and he knew every foot of it. A hundred yards ahead, a mud-crusted flat extended from the trickle of water to within a few feet of the over-hanging bank. The mud flat looked firm. But Pecos knew better; he'd lost more than one cow on that deceptive-looking mud flat.

He knew that the spot just ahead was a "soap-hole," that underneath the dry looking crust there was a jelly-like mess of slimy, ropy mud that was almost bottomless. Any living thing breaking through the innocent looking crust stood a good chance of being sucked slowly to a horrible death.

Pecos swerved the roan sharply, circled the soap-hole and continued on along the firm creek bed. He flung a glance back over his shoulder, and fresh hope flared in his heart at what he saw. Jack Dark, mounted on a powerful dun, had out-distanced Sheriff Bill Raven. He'd just plunged over the creek bank, was spurring wildly after Pecos Buck, rifle lifting for another shot.

Jack Dark didn't sense the peril just ahead. But his mount did. With jolting suddenness, the dun plunged its fore feet into the sand and skidded to a sudden halt. But Jack Dark, intent only on getting close enough to send a bullet into the back of Pecos Buck, didn't stop. He arced gracefully over the dun's head, turned a complete somer-sault in the air, and rocketed feet first, straight down into the most deadly portion of the soap-hole.

Pecos Buck stopped. He grinned, sat there as Sheriff Bill Raven came pounding furiously along the creek bed. Jack Dark, in the slimy mess up to his waist, was struggling madly to free himself, squalling with terror. But his wild struggles served only to settle him deeper into the morass.

Bill Raven saw Dark's plight, stopped. He dismounted and ran toward the trapped man. But when the mud began to quiver and suck at his feet he backed hastily away.

Jack Dark's hawkish face was fixed in a livid mask of fear.

"Help!" he screamed at Bill Raven. "Fod God's sake, sheriff, throw me a rope—I'm bein' sucked under!"

"I got no rope," Raven yelled. "You got a rope on yore saddle?"

"No—no rope!" Jack Dark gibbered. "But yuh got to do somethin',

quick. I'll die like a rat in this hellish stuff. There's Buck—mebby' he's got a rope!"

Bill Raven's eyes swiveled to the wiry oldster, who sat calmly on his bronc a hundred feet away, and watched grinningly. Pecos looked like he was having a hell of a good time.

"Hey, Pecos, you got a lariat rope?" the sheriff yelled.

"Sure, I got a rope," Pecos said.

Bill Raven started running along the creek bed toward Pecos.

"Then give it to me, damn it!" he cried. "Cain't yuh see this gent'll soon be in up to his eyes?"

Pecos whirled the roan and spurred along the creek. He grinned back at Sheriff Raven. "That's too bad," he said. "I'd hate like hell for that hole to get all smelly with polecat stink. Why don't yuh do somethin'?"

Bill Raven stopped. "Dang it, Pecos, you gone crazy?" he bawled. "Gimme that rope!"

"You got to remember I'm an outlaw now, Bill," Pecos Buck said. "I got to be hard. But I ain't unreasonable. Just shuck yore gun and toss it to the ground, then we'll talk things over."

Sheriff Raven cursed helplessly, and looked back. The ropy black slime was now up to the Coffin owner's armpits.

"For God's sake, men, do somethin'!" Jack Dark was pleading. "Cain't yuh see I'm sinkin'? Throw me somethin' to hold me up!"

Spurred by Dark's peril, Bill Raven snarled at Pecos, "Gimme that rope, you ol' renegade, or I'll gun yuh!"

"Shuck yore gun, then," Pecos said stubbornly.

Helplessly, Sheriff Bill Raven tossed his .45 to the sand. "Now gimme the rope," he spat.

"Not so fast," Pecos said calmly. "That snake's in the slime, and he'll stay there—unless he does some talkin'."

"Talkin', hell," Bill Raven raged. "Ain't no time for talkin'. That devilish stuff's up to his neck now."

Dispassionately, old Pecos Buck looked at the trapped man. Jack Dark was whimpering with abject terror, clawing frantically with his one free hand at the stinking mud that was licking greedily about his throat.

"Let 'im strangle," Pecos said unfeelingly. "But I don't mean to be hard. I'll pull 'im out, if he'll talk some first!"

Bill Raven quieted. "What yuh mean, talk?" he asked.

"Bill, like I said, you've slowed down a lot. I didn't steal no calves, nor butcher no steers. That gent there in the mudhole just planted the evidence to make it look like I done them things. He stole a lot of my cows, to boot, and burned my haystacks and cut my fences. "Dark," he asked the struggling man, "you crave to talk—or had yuh rather sink?"

"I'll talk," Jack Dark whimpered. "I'll do anything, only get me outa here. . . ."

Jack Dark talked. In his horrible fear of the viscous slime that was slowly pulling him down, he blurted the whole story of how he had tried to frame Pecos Buck. He told how he had stolen Double O cattle, how he had harassed Pecos Buck in every way he could, trying to force him off his spread. And, under Pecos' relentless prodding, he told about a lot of other things that he'd done, things that would place him behind bars for a long time.

When Jack Dark had gasped out his story, the rawboned old sheriff grinned and slapped Pecos Buck on the shoulder.

"Mebby I have slowed down some, Pecos," he admitted. "But I didn't noways believe you'd done them things. I was jest waitin' for a chance to prove it."

"That's swell," Pecos said, and grinned broadly. "Bill, yuh kin have that rope now."

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